



JACK CLARK



WILL PRENTISS

BLUE AND GRAY

WEEKLY

Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1904 by Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 7.

NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 23, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

ON SPECIAL SERVICE; OR, THE BOYS IN BLUE IN DANGER.

By LIEUT HARRY LEE.



Crouching low in the water under the fallen log, Jack Clark and his companion heard every word of the plan of ambuscade proposed by Slocum, the scout, to the Confederate officers. The revelation was a thrilling one.

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CHAPTER I.

A DANGEROUS MISSION.

A small division of General McClellan's army in November, 1861, was stationed near Coon's Ferry, on the Potomac river, above Washington.

The great Civil War between the North and South was well on. Just now the two great armies were facing each other along the Potomac like two snarling tigers, each waiting for the other to jump.

For almost a year, or at least over eight months, McClellan's mighty army lay in the trenches along the Potomac inactive and chafing for an opportunity to advance.

Whatever critics may have to say to-day respecting this conduct of the great Union general, it is sufficient that he organized and created one of the finest armies the world ever saw.

Beauregard, at Manassas, was also waiting for the Union troops to advance. He was a shrewd general, who sought a repetition of the Battle of Bull Run.

All this while, however, comparative quiet was not by any means the order.

Daily, and almost hourly, there were minor engagements and skirmishes in the intervening region. These at times attained the dignity of battles.

In this small division at Coon's Ferry was a company of youths, none of whom were over nineteen years of age. They were all of good family and had been mustered in the town of Fairdale, New York.

In that town they had been known as the Fairdale Blues. They had attained much distinction in the Battle of Bull Run and had figured creditably in a number of thrilling episodes since.

Their captain, Jack Clark, was a youth of great mental and physical ability. He had been first in his class at school and a leader in athletics.

He was as handsome as he was dashing and brave. He was much beloved by his young comrades.

When the famous call of President Lincoln for troops went through the North the Fairdale Blues had been of the first to answer. Homer Clark, who was Jack's father, gave his blessing to his brave son and said:

"If our country needs you I must give you up, Jack, though it almost breaks my heart. But God may answer my prayers and bring you safely through."

Mrs. Clark and Jack's sister Bessie bade him a tearful farewell. But the latter, who was a young girl of rare courage and nerve, soon left her home to become a nurse in the Union service.

The Fairdale Blues had been quartered at Coon's Ferry

for some while. The boys were getting impatient with their inactivity.

The regular routine of camp life became irksome after a time. Soldiers long for a change of scene and for incident.

So, upon petition of the rest of the boys, Jack, who was a warm friend of the President, wrote to Mr. Lincoln as follows:

"Mr. President: My company, the Fairdale Blues, are anxious to assume more active service. If you have a commission of any sort, no matter how dangerous, we would like to secure it. Anything is better than idleness."

"(Signed) JACK CLARK, Captain Fairdale Blues."

In response to this in a few days the answer came back:

"My Dear Clark: Your letter at hand and its contents appreciated. We wish all most earnestly to advance directly upon the foe. But the time is not yet ripe. Have good courage and be patient. If, however, you personally wish a dangerous mission, I can give it to you. Report to me at an early moment and I will give you the plan."

"(Signed) A. LINCOLN."

It is needless to say that young Captain Clark was delighted. He read the despatch to his lieutenants, Hal Martin and Walter Gray.

"Hurrah!" cried Hal. "Just run down to Washington and see what can be done, Jack. It is irksome lying around here with nothing to do."

"The boys are all eager for a fight," said Walter.

"I shall go down to Washington to-night," said Jack. "I hope to bring you good news."

So that evening Jack Clark landed in the capital city. It bore a far different appearance in those days. Only those who were present in the city at that time can fully appreciate this fact.

War was in the air. No other topic engrossed the mind. The hotels and even private dwellings were headquarters of military men. Troops patrolled the streets and surrounded the Capitol and the White House.

Further out along the Potomac were the intrenchments of that mighty army under the skilful McClellan.

Captain Clark at once proceeded to the White House. He desired a personal interview with President Lincoln.

It was not the first time he had been entrusted with a commission by the President. He knew that if he applied to General McClellan or to the War Department he would simply be sent back to his encampment to await orders.

But there was always a mission of some sort, an expedition, scouting or otherwise, which the President was eager to direct.

It was not easy to get an audience with President Lincoln in those days.

Thousands of visitors, many with objects of personal concern, were hanging about the White House seeking to get his ear. Many of these were disappointed.

But Jack finally found an orderly who agreed to take the

message to the President. It seemed an age to Jack before he returned.

But he finally came back, and with a bright expression upon his face.

"President Lincoln directs me to show you in," said the orderly. "This way, please."

Eagerly Jack followed. In a few moments he was in the audience room. But Jack was escorted further and into the President's private room.

President Lincoln sat by his desk. He was pale and care-worn. His homely features lit up with an expression of pleasure, however, and he said:

"Ah, Captain Clark, I am glad to see you. Have a seat."

Jack seated himself and said:

"You can guess the object of my visit, President Lincoln. My boys are eager for something to do. From the best advices I can get, there could be no better time to advance upon the enemy."

A shade of regret was in the President's eyes.

"I have long believed that," he said. "But our War Board is not yet ready. We are all waiting with patience. But I appreciate your zeal, and I think I can give you and your boys a chance to do something."

"I shall be very glad," said Jack.

The President pulled a bell cord. An orderly answered at once.

"Simpson," said the President, "see if General McDowell is in the corridor. Tell him to come here at once."

The orderly vanished. In a short while the door opened and General McDowell, the hero of Bull Run, stood on the threshold.

"General McDowell," said the President, "this is Captain Jack Clark, of the Fairdale Blues."

The famous general shook hands warmly with the boy captain.

"I have heard of Clark and his boys," he said. "I know they are true blue. I would there were more like them."

"Thank you, general," replied Jack modestly. "We seek only to do our duty. That is the highest honor and the greatest pleasure we ask."

"There will be plenty of opportunity," said the general. Then he looked at the President, who said:

"McDowell, you call to mind that matter we were talking about yesterday, do you not? That projected expedition to Black Swamp, just beyond Guilford?"

"Oh, yes!" and McDowell's face lit up. He fixed his gaze on Jack. "On my word, I believe Clark is the right man for that job!"

"So do I!"

"I am ready and eager for anything!"

"It is a perilous undertaking," said President Lincoln. "It means a trip almost into the jaws of death. You and your little command might never come back!"

"We do not fear danger," said Jack. "I beg you will do us the honor."

General McDowell selected a map from those on the table. He and the President inspected it for a while.

Then the President said:

"You outline the plan to him, McDowell."

General McDowell turned and, regarding Jack, gravely said:

"Up a small creek beyond Guilford is a swamp and wild tract of woods. The swamp is known as Black Swamp. In this tangled region is the stronghold of a notorious outlaw and guerrilla, known as Ward Howell. He has committed so many atrocities, murders and dark crimes that he is feared by all the honest, law-abiding people of the region. He has allied himself with the Confederacy, and is proving a thorn in the side to General McClellan. He has fully a thousand lawless men under his command. His position is such that he can strike a hard blow at our line near that point and escape easily. It would be useless to send a large body of men into the swamp. He could dodge them and eventually defeat a large army."

"Now, a handful of men, on special service, might creep into the swamp and capture him. It would mean strategy and clever work. Failure would mean death."

"But Howell must be captured at any cost. Hang him to the nearest tree. He has harassed our troops, destroyed supply trains and killed more men than this government can afford to lose."

"We have discussed every plan and have decided that a clever officer like yourself, with a smart company like your Fairdale Blues, detailed on special service, will stand a better chance to wipe out Howell than any other. Now you have the whole plan. I will say that we will not insist upon you or any other man undertaking this task. You must volunteer. We realize the great danger of the enterprise, and you may accept or decline as you choose. If you decline you may go back to Coon's Ferry and await orders. If you volunteer, the President will detach you for special service. That is all."

Jack listened quietly. When General McDowell had ceased speaking and the eyes of both great men were upon him, he said:

"I will volunteer. I assure you that my boys will welcome this enterprise. The very danger involved adds to its charm. When we have captured Ward Howell, who is little more or better than a bush-whacker, I will report to you again."

Jack arose and stood respectfully before the President. The great man's careworn visage seemed to grow softer, and there was a wistful light in his kindly eyes, as he said:

"You are a brave youth, and I almost fear to send you on this expedition, Clark. I know and respect your father and your mother. It is sad indeed that this war must claim so many of our best young men. While there is no nobler thing than to give one's life for one's country, still we cannot spare you, Jack Clark. I shall pray for your safe return."

"I thank you, President Lincoln," said Jack manfully. "I assure you I hope to return safely and with success."

"The confidence of youth," said General McDowell. "It almost seems suicidal to send these boys into the lair of such a tiger as that fellow Howell."

"I beg that you will not reconsider your decision," cried Jack, earnestly. "I have no fear of Howell, and, while we intend doing nothing rash, we hope for success."

President Lincoln nodded slowly.

"I believe you have the necessary genius to offset Howell's cunning," he said. "McDowell, I am going to detach the Blues on this special service."

"Very well, sir," said the general, with a bow. "I hope they will succeed. If they remove Howell it will be a great service for the cause. He has caused us more trouble than any other man in the Confederate Army."

"Captain Clark," said the President, "here are maps of this swamp, and I advise you to take them and study them. What will be your first move?"

"I shall return to Coon's Ferry and at once march to Guilford," said Jack. "From there I shall take measures to invade the swamp and trap Howell. I cannot say more at present."

"That is enough," said the President. "I only ask that you report to me as often as possible."

"I will promise that, sir."

"Good luck to you, Clark," said General McDowell. "I am interested in your enterprise."

Jack shook hands with the President and the general and took his leave. He had the necessary papers giving him leave to enter upon this new undertaking. His company was detached by the President on special service.

When the boy captain got back to Coon's Ferry he was welcomed warmly by his comrades.

When he told them of his interview with the President they swung their caps and cheered.

They knew well what it meant. There was dangerous work ahead of them. All had heard of Ward Howell, the bushwhacker and guerrilla, the man who never made prisoners of war, but hanged every Union man captured. They knew that he was merciless and that to fall into his hands meant death.

But this did not deter them. So the Blues marched forth on special service.

CHAPTER II.

A FAIR DEFENDER.

The march to Guilford was not a hard one. The day was fine and the roads excellent. But beyond that point matters were different.

They now skirted the high land to a point on Goose Creek. In this way they evaded the outposts of the Confederate Army.

The Black Swamp was yet ten miles away. The boys made bivouac that night in a shady glen near a rapid stream of cold water.

Pickets were established and all precautions taken to guard against surprise. Then they slept.

The morning sun did not show itself. When the Blues

sprung out of their blankets a mist hung over the landscape so heavy as to hide objects not twenty feet distant.

Jack and Hal Martin were now in a quandary what to do.

To march on in that mist meant a deadly risk. At any moment they might walk right into the camp of a superior force. That would mean capture.

To remain where they were, on the other hand, might be fatal.

The country was overrun with raiding bands of Confederates. That the Blues had not encountered them as yet was a wonder.

"It's an even thing," declared Hal. "For a certainty we ought not to remain here."

"Very well," decided Jack. "Give the order to fall in, and we will go ahead cautiously."

A few of the boys were sent ahead as scouts. In this way the Blues advanced for a mile.

This brought them to the foot of a little eminence. They came upon a highway, though where it led they could not guess.

And now one of the boys who had been acting as a scout came in excitedly.

"There is a body of cavalry just ahead of us," he declared. "They are advancing down the highway."

"Cavalry!" exclaimed Jack. "That probably means that they are raiders."

"Just so!" cried Hal. "It is probably some detachment of Union cavalry picking up our outposts."

At once the Blues were halted and placed in a position for defence. Jack drew back to a point half way up the eminence, and which commanded a view of the highway.

Here was an ancient stump fence. It made an excellent breastworks, as well as a place of concealment.

Behind this the little company crouched. Now far down the highway could be heard the clatter of horses' hoofs. The detachment was coming at full speed.

The mist was not so dense but that a dim view of the highway could be obtained.

And now the riders came into view. In advance were outriders who held their carbines over their saddle pommels ready for instant use.

At first glance Jack saw that they were not of the regular Confederate Army. Their uniforms were only partly of gray and partly of brown jeans.

They wore heavy boots, clattering sabres and great slouch hats. Bearded and fierce beyond description they were.

When the advance guard had passed the main body appeared. In advance rode a powerfully built man, who might have been Blackbeard, the pirate, so far as personal makeup went.

He was certainly a rough type of man. In an instant Hal gripped Jack's arm.

"That is Howell," he declared in a whisper. "If we could only get him!"

"Get him!" repeated Jack, and for an instant he weighed the chances. But he saw that it was not feasible.

Howell had a force behind him three or four times that of the Blues. To attack him would be disastrous.

It was fortunate that the Blues had the stump fence between them and the foe. Their presence was not suspected.

The guerrillas marched by.

They were a motley crew, and their appearance such as to terrify the ordinary traveler. Men of every class and type of villainy made up the party.

When they had passed Jack arose and for a moment tried to decide what it was best to do.

Chance had favored them with a sight of the man they sought at once. But to capture him had not been feasible.

To pursue the guerrillas would be dangerous. That Howell was just starting upon a raid of some sort was certain.

The guerrillas had vanished in the mist. Jack's plan was to keep on for the Black Swamp. He intended to keep the Blues in hiding, and at the right moment, when Howell was attended only by a small guard, descend upon and capture him.

This was by all means the best plan, as he believed. He reckoned that it would be folly to engage the guerrilla openly with a superior force against him.

So the Blues marched down to the highway. The mist was still as dense as ever.

Silently as possible the march was resumed. For over a mile they went on and all was well.

Then a startling thing occurred. A sudden breath of air lifted the mist.

Not three hundred yards away, across a wide field, there was seen a long line of gray uniforms. A solid column of Confederates were marching across that space.

Of course, they saw the blue uniforms of Jack Clark's company. Instantly the loud commands of the officers were heard as the column quickly deployed into line of battle.

For a moment Jack hardly knew what to do.

He did not want to give battle, for the foe greatly outnumbered him. But he could not at that moment see how he was to avoid it.

He gave quick orders and the Blues deployed as a skirmish line, gradually falling back in an orderly retreat. The firing was getting hot when the Blues came to a bit of timber.

In this they found shelter, and for a time the Confederates were held in check. But Jack saw that they were endeavoring to gain the proper distance to enable them to make a charge.

To baffle this plan was necessary. So reluctantly the Blues fell back once more. But Hal suddenly cried:

"They are coming!"

This was seen to be true. The gray columns, with bayonets fixed, were coming to drive the Blues out of the timber.

It was a critical moment. Nobody realized the danger more than Jack Clark. But he was cool and steady.

"Attention, Blues! Ready! Fire!"

A heavy volley staggered the first line of the charge. Another broke the line. But behind it was another. Jack saw that they could not be stopped.

It was a desperate moment. It did certainly look as if the Blues were doomed to capture.

But again their good fortune interposed to save them.

The mist seemed suddenly to sweep like a wall between them and their foes.

Jack gave the order to change front and the Blues retreated hastily at an angle. In a few moments they were out of the woods and climbing an eminence.

Up this they ran blindly. At the summit they halted. Far below in the woods the commands of the officers and the random shots of the foe could be heard.

Jack was too shrewd to linger long in that vicinity.

He marched his boys rapidly down the other side of the eminence and into a lane. For two miles the retreat continued.

Then currents of air lifted the mist. The sunlight came flooding through and the landscape lay revealed.

Jack had not the least idea of their location. He studied the country with his glass. The only habitation was an old plantation house not more than a mile away.

There was no sign of life about the place, but Jack decided to visit it.

So the Blues marched away down a weed-grown lane. They presently came to some negro cabins.

At sight of the blue uniforms the blacks came flocking out. They were a motley crew. One of them, a patriarchal old fellow, with a white beard, was singled out by Jack.

"I say, Pomp," cried the boy captain, "who owns this plantation?"

The old negro looked at Jack a moment and then scraped and bowed.

"Dis am ole Massa Buxton's place," he replied. "I done reckon he see yo' comin' an' he run off laik fun. He mighty 'fraid ob de Yankees, I done reckon."

"Well," laughed Jack, "don't you think he ought to be? Don't we look like a bad crowd?"

Old Pomp grinned and ran his fingers through his white wool.

"I reckon I hab seen a heap wuss," he replied. "But don' yo' fo'git dat if Massa Buxton run away Missy Kitty wait, not fo' ten times as many as yo'!"

"Miss Kitty? Who is she?"

The old coon looked surprised.

"Yo' don't say yo' neber heard anyfing ob our Kitty? Why, she knows mos' eberybody up in Washn'ton, an' eberybody knows her. She am de propah figure, yo' bet!"

"Indeed!" said Jack, with interest. "We shall be glad to meet her, I am sure. I suppose she is Mr. Buxton's daughter, eh?"

"No, sah!" replied old Pomp emphatically. "Yo' bet, she ain't, an' if ole man Buxton had half her spunk yo' kin bet fings would be a heap different on dis plantashun. Dat am a solemn fac', sah!"

Jack laughed and tossed the old darkey a coin.

Then the Blues marched on. Jack might never have thought of the incident again had it not been for a surprising event.

As a matter of fact, the Blues were short of rations.

It would soon be necessary to make a raid on the supplies of some planter whose sympathies were with the South. In

fact, Jack had decided to pick up a few hogs and chickens on Buxton's plantation if possible.

So as the Blues swung down the lane in regular step visions of savory bacon and fried chicken came up before them. They were ready and eager.

Just before the plantation house was a great flower garden. Before reaching this the lane passed between a row of English yews.

Jack and Hal walked in advance of the Blues. Suddenly, as they turned a bend in the lane, a startling thing befell them.

A feminine voice rang out upon the air. Seated on a handsome coal black thoroughbred horse, with a carbine across the animal's neck, was a young girl of such statuesque beauty as neither Jack nor Hal had ever seen the like of.

"Halt! Come forward another step and I will fire upon you!"

Her challenge rang out loud and clear. Her eyes flashed like brilliant stars. She raised the carbine threateningly.

Jack turned and gave the command:

"Halt!"

The Blues came to a halt. For a moment all stared at the resolute young woman in surprise. That she was in earnest none could doubt.

Jack took a step forward and respectfully lifted his cap.

"Pardon me, madam! May I ask why you oppose our progress?"

"This is private property, sir, and you are trespassers. I warn you to leave at once!"

"This is a time of war. We are Union soldiers, and we understand the owner of this plantation is a Southern sympathizer."

"He is not worthy that distinction, I can promise you!" said the young girl, forcibly, "for he is a coward. He has fled and left this place defenceless. But I am here with the right and the courage to defend it!"

Jack looked at the young woman, and his admiration was intense. He saw that she was a beauty of the Southern type, proud and haughty and ready to sell her life.

"I admire your courage," said Jack, in a polite tone. "But I must ask who you are? Certainly you are not Mr. Buxton's daughter?"

The girl made a gesture of disgust.

"No!" she said stiffly. "I am proud to say that he is no relative of mine. He is simply my guardian. I am Kitty Belcourt. My father was Andre Belcourt, of Richmond, and a gentleman born. I alone am left to defend this plantation. I alone am not afraid of the Yankees. I warn you that I shall defend this place with my life."

Jack bowed low.

"Far be it from me to take your life, Miss Belcourt," he said. "I would rather go further and stand the chance of getting rations for my men. In consideration of your brave defence, we will leave you undisturbed."

The young girl looked at Jack in a wondering sort of way. She was, however, silent, while Jack turned to Hal.

"Order a countermarch," he said. "We will go on to the next plantation."

Kitty Belcourt sat upon her black horse like a white statue as the Blues countermarched and proceeded back through the lane.

Suddenly she reined her horse a little nearer and said:

"Captain, your men look worn. While I abhor your cause, I cannot willingly do you harm. At least, I cannot see you starve. If you will wait I will order the slaves to bring down four fat hogs and a beef creature."

Jack gave an eager cry of surprise.

"Ah!" he cried, "you sympathize with our cause. I can see that! Miss Belcourt, your woman's heart——"

"Stop!" she cried haughtily. "I am a Southern woman. My heart is with the South. But I cannot see men starve. You shall be fed, for we cannot forget our rules of hospitality. But that terminates our acquaintance."

"As you will, Miss Belcourt," said Jack, with a low bow. "I will pay you gold for the supplies you vouchsafe us!"

The girl looked surprised.

"Pay me! Pay an enemy! Is that the way you Yankees fight?"

"We do not attack a weaker force," said Jack. "We want nothing we do not pay for!"

"If all were like you the world would be decidedly better," said Miss Kitty. "There would be no such thing as war."

"We deprecate the war extremely!"

"I am surprised. We have been led to believe that the Northerners so hate us that they would gladly exterminate us."

"That is not true."

"Will you tell me what has brought you into the dangerous region? You are almost surrounded by our men."

"Yes," replied Jack, readily. "I will gladly tell you. We have come here to, if possible, capture or kill the noted outlaw and guerrilla, Ward Howell."

The young girl's face turned white.

"Ward Howell?" she gasped. "Do you then know him?"

"By repute, and I believe that is none of the best."

"You have spoken truly. Ward Howell is a deep scoundrel, and I fear him worse than I do the Yankees."

"You fear him? He is allied with your cause."

"Very true! But his heart is not in his work. He is really a traitor. I know whereof I speak."

"A traitor?" exclaimed Jack, in surprise.

"Yes! I know of his treachery and I shall betray him to General Beauregard at the very first opportunity."

Her manner was decided. While the boy captain could not help but wonder, he made no further comment.

Kitty Belcourt reined her horse about and held a shrill whistle to her lips. Into the lane ran several negroes.

She gave them quick orders regarding the hogs and the young steer. They ran away rapidly to execute them.

The Blues meanwhile had been brought to a halt by Hal Martin. Jack was waiting in hesitancy when the young woman reined her horse nearer.

"Captain," she said in clear tones, "the slaves will slaug-

ter the creatures and bring them to you within an hour. I advise you to bivouac here for the present. You are safe, for Colonel Gardner's regiment passed here early this morning, and none of our troops are near at hand."

"I thank you, Miss Belcourt," said Jack politely. "You have a soldier's appreciation."

Her face flushed a little and she half reined her horse as if to go. Then she said impulsively:

"We Southerners pride ourselves on our fine hospitality. We cannot afford even to slight a foe. You and your lieutenant are invited to dine at the house. We dine at two. I trust you will report on time."

Before Jack could even thank her she wheeled her horse and dashed away. The boy captain glanced after her with deep interest.

At this moment Hal appeared at his shoulder.

"Well, captain," he said, "have you made peace with that fair young woman?"

"Whew!" exclaimed Jack. "We are overwhelmed with honor. You and I are invited to the house for dinner!"

Hal opened his eyes wide.

"Did you accept?"

"I had no opportunity."

"What do you mean?"

"She flung the invitation in my face and got away before I could say a word."

At this Hal laughed.

"These Southern girls are inexplicable," he said. "But she is such a beauty that one can forgive anything in her."

"Quite right!" agreed Jack. "So I thought when I accepted the invitation."

"Then you accepted it?"

Jack made a wry face.

"Do you think I need urging?" he asked. "Haven't we suffered the pangs of hunger long enough on this march? Would I not be foolish to decline?"

"You are right!" cried Hal. "I am with you, I assure you."

The Blues encamped in the lane.

Miss Kitty had declared that no Confederates were in the immediate vicinity, so they felt safe.

In due time as the young hostess had declared, the negro slaves appeared with the slaughtered creatures.

It did not take the boys long to make use of their gift. They speedily had hot fires going and the meat roasting over the live coals.

Jack and Hal, at two o'clock, made their way to the plantation house. As they stepped upon the porch they were met by a negro butler, who obsequiously showed them into the house.

The two young officers, dressed in their best uniforms, made a handsome appearance. Their hostess appeared a moment later.

She was cordial but dignified, and there was a reserve in her manners which, however, could not be taken for stiffness.

She conversed with them in a formal manner and soon

led the way to the dining room. Here was spread a lavish meal, the odor of which appealed to the boys most strongly.

Seated at the table, Jack and Hal did not by any means design that the occasion should be constrained or painfully formal.

In spite of her best efforts, Miss Kitty was obliged to put aside her reserve. In the course of the conversation with her Jack learned some very important facts.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE POWER OF THE ENEMY.

Miss Belcourt proved a most charming hostess. It was impossible for her to conceal the better side of her nature from the boys.

The conversation turned upon many subjects, and finally, though Jack long avoided it, that of the present strife was brought up.

"It is my sincere hope that the war will be a short one," said Hal. "I hope that peace will be restored, and that we shall be one country—under one flag."

"I echo that sentiment," said Miss Kitty, quickly. "And that the flag be the Stars and Bars."

"We can hardly drink to such a toast," said Jack. "Our grandsires fought for the Stars and Stripes in the Revolution and we cannot go back on it now."

"The South seeks only her rights," said Miss Kitty. "Once she gains them she will disarm and sue for peace."

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"It is too bad," he said. "This opinion has divided households and estranged whole families. I recall my own experience. But a year since I was at school in Fairdale, and my chum was a Virginia boy, a very dear friend. His name is Will Prentiss, and he is—"

"Will Prentiss!" gasped Miss Kitty, and her face was deadly pale. "Do you know Will Prentiss?"

"As an own brother!" said Jack. "Do you know him?"

"His sister Nell is my dearest friend. I recall now that she often spoke of her brother's chum, Jack Clark—"

"I am Jack Clark!"

"You?" exclaimed Kitty in surprise. Her face flushed and a strange eager light came into her eyes. As for Jack, he could hardly restrain himself and at once blurted forth:

"This must put us on better terms, Miss Belcourt. Pardon me if I ask for Miss Prentiss. We were friends—"

"I know," said Kitty with a softness in her voice. "She has told me much of you. And I know that she holds you in high esteem."

It was true that at the Fairdale school Jack Clark's chum had been Will Prentiss, the son of Colonel Prentiss, high in the councils of the Confederacy.

Once Jack had visited them in their Virginia home, and there he had met Nellie Prentiss, who was one of the most beautiful and charming girls in Virginia.

There had sprung up between them a liking which might

soon have ripened into something stronger. But the war sent Will Prentiss home to assume the captaincy of the Virginia Grays.

The two chums were to meet now only as foes. Jack knew not what feeling Nellie Prentiss had for him now, but he felt that there was a gulf between them.

Whether it could ever be bridged only time could tell.

"I am pleased to know that she still has a kindly feeling toward me," said Jack. "This war has parted so many—"

"Yes," said Miss Kitty, with a smile, "I assume that you feel kindly toward her."

"I assuredly do."

Miss Belcourt arose. There was a pleasant smile upon her face. Her whole manner was changed.

"I have asked you this question for a purpose," she said. "I will now ask you another. You know that Miss Prentiss has from the first given her best services to the Confederacy. She has done valiant service in Washington as a spy!"

"I have heard of that."

"If you were to meet her in these days would you seek to effect her capture on that score?"

Jack started up.

"Pardon me, Miss Belcourt," he cried. "I have no such commission. The United States is not making war upon women. Again, I would never be so distinctly ungallant to your sex. We men of the North do not lay such a forcible claim upon the art of chivalry as the men of the South, but we respect a true woman."

Kitty Belcourt's face lit up.

"That is just the answer I have been led to expect from you," she said. "Oh, your praises have been many times sung to me, Jack Clark. Now I have a surprise for you. Know you that Miss Prentiss is at this moment in this house!"

A sharp cry escaped Jack's lips, and he was upon his feet instantly. A wild and eager light was in his eyes.

"Nell in this house? And will she see me? This is indeed a joy! You are not jesting with me?"

"Wait!"

Kitty Belcourt opened the door of an adjoining room. She spoke a few low words. Then in the doorway appeared a young girl, who was as beautiful as a dream.

"Nell!" cried Jack Clark. He was in an instant bowing before the girl who was to him fairer than all others on earth. She smiled in a bewitching way.

"So you are glad to see me, Jack? And you will not hang me for a spy?"

"Perish the thought!" cried Jack gaily. "On the other hand, you will not entrap me into the hands of your soldiers?"

"I am not treacherous," said Nell with a thrill of earnestness in her tone. "We do not serve our country in that way, do we, Kitty?"

"By no means!" responded Miss Belcourt. "But now, if you two reunited ones wish to confer in private, I will ask Lieutenant Martin to the conservatory to see my new orchids."

"Charmed, I am sure!" cried Hal, with alacrity. The last course of the dinner had been finished. It was a dinner which Nell Prentiss had not dared to participate in, as, being known as a female spy, she had feared capture.

Hal and Miss Kitty left the room, while Nell and Jack strolled into the drawing room.

The young girl's hand trembled as it rested upon the arm of the boy captain of the Blues.

"Then you still hold me dear in your memory, do you, Nell?" asked Jack in a low tone. "I will say that you are never out of my mind."

"Why should I forget you?" she asked. "We were good friends, Jack."

"And now——"

"We are foes!"

"Foes?"

"Yes!" a swift light of pride came into her eyes. "Your people are making war upon us, and you wear their uniform."

"I hope you are not making a mistake. The first shot was fired by your people."

"The first outrage is chargeable to the people of the North!"

They stood before each other. The impulse of love was in their hearts. But the barrier of sectional feeling, of national prejudice, was between them.

"Why need that affect us, Nell? I am just a plain soldier in the Army of the Potomac."

"But you are making war upon those I hold dear."

"And you are making war upon the government of the free, the Constitution which is the noblest emblem in the history of nations. All men are born free and equal. Oh, Nell, we are both wrong!"

She trembled like an aspen. Her face was very white.

"If I was sure of that, I would do penance the rest of my life," she said.

"But—this strife—this question which only arms can settle, should not divide us, Nell——"

"It does!" she said truthfully. "It is hard for me to say that, Jack. But it does! Just look at the country to-day. My father is a member of the President's staff of the Confederate States. My brother is captain of the Virginia Grays. I am a female spy in the service of the Confederacy.

"You are a captain in the Fairdale Blues. Your father is a trusted agent of the United States in Washington. Either you or I must yield. I cannot, neither can you. We can neither of us bend. It is too bad, Jack—but it is fate!"

Jack Clark clenched his hands hard. He knew that she spoke the truth.

"Oh, Nell, must we be forever divided in this way? Is there no hope——"

"Yes!"

"What?" he cried eagerly. "Oh, tell me! I will give all in life——"

"It is not necessary. We must wait. After the war the country will be changed. If we win, the new South will rise to even grander prosperity. Our plantations will mul-

tiply, our system of slavery may be modified, but it will be for the better. We shall flourish! Then you will see the justice of our claims and the righteousness of our cause, and then—then, Jack, if you will come——"

"I will come to you then!" said the young captain. "But, Nell, do not be deceived. Fate has not written it that way. The South will surely lose. Your plantations will thrive, but under different labor. The blacks will be free. The Stars and Stripes will float over the whole land. But in either case I am true and will come to you."

"It is the division of our people," she said. "It divides us! When they unite, then we shall unite also."

"Forever!"

Jack would have taken her hand, but she stepped back and said almost coldly:

"Not yet!"

They now conversed in a more formal fashion. Nell told of a long ride in the saddle from Vienna. She had been detained at the Buxton plantation by the lameness of her horse.

"But what has brought you with your handful of men into this dangerous region," she asked.

"We are sent here on special service by the President. I may further say that that service is the capture of Ward Howell."

"Howell!" she exclaimed with a start. "Oh, he is a wily fox! A dark scoundrel! Take care you do not fall into his hands!"

"We are on our guard. But let me ask you, where is the master of this place?"

"Albert Buxton? A greater coward never lived. As soon as he saw your blue uniforms he decamped post haste. And in that fact lies your peril!"

"Our peril?"

"Yes! You see, he will spread the news that you are here! That may lead General Studley to come down here with his forces and surround you. I warn you to keep on your guard!"

"I thank you for the warning. We shall tarry here only long enough to secure rations. I shall leave within the hour."

"I am afraid you will deem it best to leave sooner!" said a mocking voice. Jack turned as if on a pivot.

What he saw transfixed him.

Nell Prentiss, with a sharp cry, started back. In the doorway stood a powerfully built man, dressed in a semi-Confederate uniform. His greenish eyes were fixed exultantly upon Jack.

Back of him the doorway bristled with gun barrels. At the windows others appeared.

"Ward Howell himself!" exclaimed Nell, in a constrained voice. "Quick, Jack! Take this door——"

But even as she flung it open, armed men stood on the threshold. She started back and cried:

"Oh, my soul! All is lost!"

Jack, with folded arms, stood like a statue. It was easy for him to see that resistance was futile. He was cornered and must surrender.

"Enough!" he cried. "I yield!"

"That is wise!" said Howell, with a leer as he advanced and peered into the boy captain's face. "So you are the young cub who has come here to hang Howell, eh? Well, we will see how you like that sort of fun yourself. Ha, ha, ha!"

His laugh was fierce and snarling like that of a wild beast. White as chalk, Nell Prentiss stepped before him.

"Stop, Howell!" she said, sternly. "This gentleman is an officer of rank. He is not to be dealt with as though he was a spy. He must be sent to Manassas as a prisoner of war!"

"Indeed!" said the villain with a leer. "That is the way you have ordered it, eh? Who are you?"

"I am Nell Prentiss, secret service agent for General Beauregard!"

"Mebbe ye are, an' mebbe ye ain't. At any rate, ye can't give orders to Ward Howell. I know my business! I am fighting for Jeff Davis, an' he says to hang all raiders. That's what this young officer is!"

"You are mistaken!" cried Nell, stoutly. "He and his company are here by invitation!"

"Oh, they are?" said Howell softly. "By whose, may I ask?"

"By Miss Kitty's!"

"Oh, yes, I see! Miss Kitty! Very good! I want to see her at once. As for the prisoner, we will let him live for the present. To-morrow he hangs!"

Just then a wild scream came from another part of the house. A pistol shot followed.

Then, a few moments later, into the room rushed five of the guerrillas holding Hal a prisoner. Behind them, white and angry, was Kitty Belcourt.

"What means this outrage?" she cried, madly. "You consummate scoundrel, to raid this plantation, which is sworn to the Confederacy. I mean to report you to General Beauregard. He will break you!"

But Howell placed his arms akimbo and surveyed the excited young woman.

"It is too bad, Miss Belcourt," he said, courteously. "Do not fear that harm will be done the prisoner. But he must be held a prisoner for a time." Then, with sarcasm, "Surely the hospitality of this house is unexcelled, when a whole company of Union soldiers are invited to bivouac right in the plantation yard, and its officers are invited to dinner. What will General Beauregard say to this?"

For a moment there was a pause. Nell Prentiss was pale and anxious. But Kitty faced the guerrilla chief like a queen:

"Who are you to question my doings, sir?"

"I am Ward Howell, the outlaw, guerrilla, bushwhacker or what you will; now, however, a loyal officer of the Confederacy. For I wear my colonel's shoulder straps to-day, and you need no longer feel ashamed of your poor suitor, who now once more lays his heart at your feet!"

"You scoundrel!" gritted Jack, starting forward. But Howell made a motion to his men.

"Take care of him!" he said. "See that he does not escape!"

Had Jack and Hal known that six men were all that Howell had with him at the moment they would hardly have surrendered so easily.

Kitty Belcourt for the first time showed fear. Deadly aversion was in every line of her face.

"Dare not insult me with such a proposal again," she said sternly. "Better death than such a union with you!"

"You are still defiant!" gritted the villain. "Oh, well! That spirit shall be trained. Let me see! We have the two leaders of this famous enterprise. Now I think we will take you along also, Miss Belcourt. Perhaps, after a period of sober meditation in Black Swamp, you will change your mind!"

"I refuse to go with you!" cried the spirited young girl. On a shelf was a pistol. She made a rush for it.

But Howell sprung at her and threw his arms about her. Jack fought madly to go to her rescue.

But he was tightly held by his captors. It was of no use. In a few moments all were prisoners but Nell. She was helpless to aid her friends. Howell leered at her and said:

"Go back to Beauregard and tell him what I have done. What do you suppose he will care about the troubles of a chit of a girl? In less than an hour this little company of Blues, as they call themselves, will have the blues. I will wipe them out of existence!"

Leaving Nell alone in the room, Howell and his men marched the three prisoners out of the house.

They were led away by the rear, so that they were not seen by any of the Blues. It was a catastrophe such as Jack and Hal had not foreseen.

But they could not see any fine hand of treachery in it.

Jack would not distrust Nell, and he did not believe Kitty Belcourt would betray them. He was to learn later that it was the work of a spy of Howell's, who had been set to watch Kitty Belcourt.

Back of the plantation house was a long rail fence, and beyond this a hedge of hawthorn. In the shadow of this they made their way down to a dusty road which led away to the north.

The six followers of the guerrilla surrounded the prisoners and marched them forward at a rapid pace.

It was hardship for Kitty, and Jack was boiling with rage to think that he could not go to her assistance. He wished now that he had made resistance at the house.

On went the captors and the captured, and at least two miles were covered when they came to the banks of a stream.

It was Goose Creek, though Jack did not know it. Every moment they were drawing nearer the Black Swamp and the stronghold of Ward Howell.

The guerrilla marched at the head of his six men with courage and resolution in his manner. And well he might feel it, for success had attended all his ventures.

This latest one, the capture and abduction of the girl he loved, while not a daring deed, seemed likely to be a success.

Suddenly, just as they reached the verge of the great swamp, he paused. An old log cabin stood on a little knoll.

About it all was tangle and wildwood. Howell called a halt.

He detailed four of his men as sentries. The other two he despatched to headquarters for his followers. It was plain that he intended to return and attack the Blues.

The prisoners were huddled into the log cabin. Jack was almost depressed when he saw the interior.

However, they were huddled into the place. Jack and Hal were cool, but almost despairing. To them the outlook was dismal indeed.

Kitty was pale, but resolute and defiant. All the courage and temper of her Southern nature was uppermost.

When Howell had despatched his messengers for a party of his followers with whom he intended to surround and capture the little company of Fairdale Blues he entered the hut.

With a sardonic grin, he regarded the captives.

"Well, my brave Yankees!" he exclaimed, with sarcasm most keen. "How do you feel about hanging Howell now? The noose you intended for him slipped its knot, didn't it?"

"The end is not yet," said Jack, quietly. "It will be time enough for you to boast when it comes."

"The end will be to-morrow at sunrise!" said the guerrilla chief. "You will both hang from the limb of yonder oak tree!"

"We are not afraid to die!"

"You shall have a chance to prove that to-morrow. I have heard many talk like that, only to weaken at the last!"

Then he turned to Kitty Belcourt.

"As for you, my charmer, I am sure you will make a capital guerrilla's wife. With all the fire in your veins, you should ride with your husband at the head of his men."

Kitty made no answer. The guerrilla chief leered at her a moment and then left the cabin.

Jack and Hal had repeatedly strained at the ropes which bound their wrists. But they would not yield.

"Jack," said Hal in an undertone, "I fear there is no chance for us!"

"It looks bad!"

"That scoundrel will surely hang us, as he declares!"

"Well, we must meet death some time. I would rather meet it in battle."

"So would I. He has sent for his men to surround our boys. Oh, if there was only some way to send them warning!"

The two boys looked at each other with dismay. For themselves they cared less. It was hard to think of their brave little company falling into the hands of the dark scoundrel Howell.

Their fate would be a terrible one. Marched away into the depths of the Black Swamp, it would be doubtful if one emerged from the place alive.

But there was no use in repining. The only way was to be on the alert and watch for an opportunity to escape, even to the last.

The day was now coming to a close.

Just as the shadows of night began to settle, the tramp of horses' hoofs broke upon the air.

Out of the swamp marched line after line of the most villainous-looking men the prisoners had ever seen. More than six hundred of them rode by the cabin.

In their rear there came a horse and a chaise. In the vehicle rode a colored woman, whose face was not unkindly. She was of the usual type to be found in every Southern household.

As she drew rein at the door of the cabin Howell called out:

"Ah, Mammy Lou, your charge is here. She is a beauty, too, and I hold you responsible for her safe care. You understand?"

"I understands, Massa Howell," said the mammy as she alighted from the chaise. "Bress her pooty face! I'se gwine to look out fo' yo', honey. Don' yo' fear nuffin'!"

And she held out her hands to Kitty in a warm-hearted manner, which at once won the girl, for it called to mind her own mammy, on whose bosom she had slept as an infant, and for many years thereafter.

There are plenty of people alive to-day who can recall the character of the old-time black mammy, who gave her life and best affections to the rearing of the children of the "white folks."

For such in many a Southern heart there lingers a warmth which time and eternity even cannot efface. There was certainly an evil side to slavery, but there were yet many happy slaves.

Kitty Belcourt therefore at once went unhesitatingly to Mammy Lou. The two young officers, Jack and Hal, were much interested.

"Take her to camp!" said Howell, gruffly. "Now, remember, Mammy, I hold you responsible for her. If she escapes or you let her slip away from you, I will see that a noose is found to fit your neck!"

Mammy Lou laughed until her fat sides shook.

"G'long wif yo', Massa Howell! Does yo' fink wha' a fine corpus I would mek swingin' up dar on a tree? Huh! Mammy Lou want bo'n fo' to be hung. Jes' yo' g'long about yo' bizness. I takes keer ob de lily white gal. Don' yo' fear!"

Howell turned now to the guard.

"See that you keep close guard over this cabin till I return," he said. "If you fail to do so, I'll hang ye up by yer ears."

The guards knew that Howell meant what he said. They mumbled a reply and then the guerrilla leaped into the saddle and rode away at the head of his men.

Jack and Hal knew that he was going to try and entrap the Blues.

It gave them a chill.

"Don't you think Gray will suspect something and investigate our absence?" said Hal. "They ought to be on their guard."

"That is not all," said Jack. "They are outnumbered.

They will be overwhelmed, no matter whether they are on their guard or not!"

It was a dismal thought. The two young officers saw all their brilliant plans crumbling to dust.

Certainly it had seemed a foolhardy errand in the first place. Yet Jack wondered if they had not been unwise in stopping at Buxton's plantation. Possibly they might have avoided the catastrophe by making bivouac elsewhere.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ESCAPE.

After Howell's departure with his men and Kitty Belcourt had been taken away in the chaise by Mammy Lou, Jack and Hal were left in the cabin with armed sentries at the door.

They were, however, not of the sort to yield to hopeless despair.

Not for one moment did the possibility of an escape become lost to them. All sorts of plans were revolving in their brains.

Jack had noted that one of the guards was a Frenchman. It was plain that he was foreign-born.

Now the boy captain was a splendid French scholar. He took opportunity suddenly to call out:

"Ah, mo'sieur, parle vous francais?"

"Oui, oui, mo'sieur!" replied the guard. Then he continued in French: "How did you know I was French?"

"Because of your military manners," replied Jack. "I know the French school of training well. You are a graduate of the Ecole de Brienne."

"Oui, mo'sieur! You are a wizard! How did you know that?"

"By your walk. You have practised the goose-step. You are trained!"

"I left France, mo'sieur, to fight in America, because it is natural for me to be a soldier and to fight."

"Oh, but you are in the wrong company and on the wrong side."

"I shall presently fight on the other side, mo'sieur. I wish to have the experience of being with both armies. I was with McDowell at Bull Run."

Jack was intensely interested, as was Hal. The other guards did not understand French and one of them asked:

"What is all that gibberish you are talking with the prisoners?"

The guard grinned and replied in English:

"He is addressing me in French."

"What does he want?"

"He has asked me to sell him my musket. That I cannot do, for what perchance is a soldier without a musket?"

The other guards laughed coarsely:

"Better sell him your brains, Johnny Crapaud," they jeered. "Perhaps he'll give you a stiver fer them!"

"I wouldn't give one centime for yours," retorted Jean

Lecompte, for that was the Frenchman's name. "Oh, you Americans have a queer idea of wit. To say as much to a man in our army would mean a duel."

"Do you want to fight?"

"I only fight for my country or to defend my honor. If you care to assail the latter I will gladly yield you the request."

The other two guards guffawed.

"Why, you little frog-eater," said one, "I'd make one mouthful of you. But go on! Let us hear you talk French some more!"

Lecompte gave Jack a droll wink and said:

"Ah, mo'sieur le captive, these men are very wise and very funny. But they know very little. They are—le cochon!"

"Pigs!" laughed Hal. "Well, he has it right, Jack. Come now, Mo'sieur Lecompte, your sympathies are not wholly with the South. You can know what freedom means to us. These fellows cannot understand what we say. Let us treat with you!"

"That would make me a traitor," said Lecompte. "It would be wrong."

"Yet, you saw the young lady—she who was captured by Howell. You are chivalrous! You will aid her to escape!"

"My hand and my heart are ever at the service of the fair oppressed," said Lecompte profoundly. "Do I understand that she is a captive against her will?"

"Yes! Howell intends to force her to marry him!"

The little French soldier raised his hands. His face showed disgust and horror.

"Non, non!" he cried, "that must not be. Jean Lecompte will help her. She shall not suffer such a fate!"

"You can help her better and most effectively by assisting us to escape."

"Escape?"

"Yes!"

"I am entrusted with the task of keeping guard over you. I cannot be false to my trust."

"But stop and think. This man Howell is an outlaw and a scoundrel. When he returns in the morning he will order us hanged. The young girl will then be utterly in his power."

The little French guard hesitated. He shook his head finally.

"I can do nothing," he said. "I am in the service, I must obey! I am a true soldier. Allons!"

With this he turned away. Jack, however, was not dismayed. He saw that they had touched a chord in the breast of the little French soldier. He believed that this would tell.

Darkness now came on rapidly.

In the little cabin the two prisoners sat in quiet. They had given up trying to loosen their bonds.

Outside the sentries paced up and down. The night was starless. Far away in the swamp could be heard the call of a wolf and the hoot of an owl.

Hal grew drowsy. Presently his chin dropped upon his

breast. He was dreaming when suddenly a hand upon his brow awoke him.

He started up to face Jack. The boy captain put a hand over his mouth.

"Sh!" he said. "Don't make a noise. We must use caution. We are free!"

"Free?" whispered the young lieutenant. "What do you mean?"

"Get up and follow me!"

To his amazement Hal found that his bonds had been cut. He arose with silence and followed Jack outside the cabin.

As they stepped into the darkness outside Hal caught a glimpse of a dark figure which was leading the way. He also heard labored breathing nearby.

Silently the two young officers followed their guide into the gloom. In a few moments they were wading in shallow water.

Then Jack spoke:

"We are in the swamp now, Jean?"

"Oui, monsieur," replied the little French soldier, for he was their guide. "This is the way to the camp of Colonel Howell. The danger is very great."

Hal now listened to a brief explanation by Jack.

It seemed that Jean Lecompte had carefully considered the subject as presented to him by Jack. He had decided that he had nothing to gain by remaining longer with Howell.

He at once, with characteristic impulsiveness, decided to yield to Jack's entreaty. The young captain had promised to recommend him to General McClellan for a position on the staff of foreign officers.

At once Lecompte put his plans into operation. The other two guards grew drowsy. Lecompte had a flask of brandy.

This added to their drowsiness. In a short time they were in the land of dreams. Lecompte had promised them to stand guard. The rest was easy.

The swamp road into which Lecompte had led them not only led to the headquarters of Howell's gang, but presently, by taking a diverging road, they could by a short cut reach the Buxton plantation.

The two young officers were anxious as to the fate of their comrades.

They had listened intently while in the cabin for firing or distant sounds to indicate a conflict. But they had heard none.

This meant either that the Blues had surrendered without a shot or that they had taken the warning and eluded the foe.

That it was the latter case Jack sincerely hoped and believed. But he was anxious to regain his comrades as quickly as possible.

Jean Lecompte, who knew the road perfectly, proved an able guide.

It was not long before they came to the diverging road. They turned here, and, after a half hour's floundering in

the wet mosses and fens of the swamp, came out into the open.

It was too dark to see much of the country beyond. But Lecompte explained that the plantation was not two miles away.

"Ought we not to see the lights of the camp if our boys are still there?" asked Hal.

"Pshaw! You may depend upon it they are no longer there, whether prisoners or not," said Jack.

But Lecompte said:

"A ridge of land hides a view of the plantation, messieurs. Presently you shall see if there be camp fires or not."

Up a little ascent they climbed. As they cleared the brow Jack gave a sharp cry.

Beyond he saw the lights of camp fires. It was near the plantation. That it might be the camp of the Blues he could hardly believe possible.

Then he exclaimed:

"It may be our boys, but they are only a small part of that encampment. It is ten times longer than our camp. Look! It extends still further!"

By moving to the right to avoid the obstruction of view afforded by a clump of trees they were given a startling surprise.

The line of camp fires extended far into the distance.

"Whew!" exclaimed Hal. "That is a large force! It is an army!"

"An army!" gasped Jack. "It cannot be Howell's company. They could not make such a display."

"By no means!"

"Who can it be?"

The boys looked at each other. They at first conceived the thought that General McClellan had sent General McCurdy over by way of Leesburg, perhaps to attack the end of Beauregard's line and drive General Studley back.

But second thought taught them that this was hardly possible. In any event they were determined to know what force it was.

"Perhaps it is General Studley himself," ventured Hal. "You know he is moving up toward Leesburg."

"Whoever it is, they have camped on our grounds," said Jack. "And our boys have either been captured or driven away."

"Let us hope the latter."

They accordingly set out across the intervening region. It was necessary to proceed with the utmost caution.

What Jack expected presently happened. This was a sharp hail:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Jack saw the outlines of the picket in the gloom. He saw the man's musket and that its muzzle covered him.

"Friends!" he replied promptly.

"Advance, friends, with the countersign."

"For the Confederacy!" said Jack at random. But the picket clicked the hammer of his gun.

"That is not the countersign. You cannot pass."

"See here, my friend," said Jack, "don't be unreason-

able. We want to see the general commanding. We have important information for him!"

"Stand back, and I will call the guard."

Jack had learned all that he desired for the moment. He could not see the picket's uniform, but he knew that he was a Confederate. The army encamped here then was no doubt General Studley's division.

Jack stepped back and joined his companions. The picket sent out the call for the guard.

Our friends now realized that it was time to go. They had no desire to be interviewed by the Confederate guard, at least in their present guise.

CHAPTER V.

A GLAD REUNION.

"Quick!" whispered Hal. "They'll be all about us in a moment!"

The voice of the corporal could be heard asking what was wanted. The sentry's reply was:

"Some one with important information for General Studley. He was here a moment ago. Hello! Advance and meet the guard!"

But Jack and his companions were at the moment hustling away for safety through the underbrush. They could hear a movement of pursuit.

They ran on until finally, believing that they had reached a safe point, they came to a halt.

"Well," said Jack, "we have learned one important fact. General Studley is advancing to the north."

"That must mean that the Confederate Army has got tired of waiting for the Union Army to advance and are going to call the gage of battle," said Hal.

"I should think so," said Jack. "What is your opinion, Mo'sieur Lecompte?"

Jean shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, mo'sieur, I have no opinion," he said. "I must defer to you!"

"We will assume that such is the case," said Jack. "But that does not directly affect us. What must interest us most is the whereabouts of the Blues and the movements of Howell."

These were certainly the questions that must be considered. Just how to decide them was the question.

Jack had conceived an idea, but he had not the material with which to carry it out.

"If I had a Confederate uniform," he said, "I would try and get through the lines and, if possible, learn whether Studley holds the Blues as prisoners or not."

Now Jean Lecompte came to the front.

"You shall have mine, M'sieur Capitaine," he said. "We will wait here for you to come back. What say you?"

For a moment there was silence.

"I wish we could go, too," said Hal. "It will be a dreary

wait here. Of course, that is out of the question. Well, Jack, go ahead and good fortune go with you!"

It did not take Jack long to exchange uniforms with Jean. The young captain was soon ready.

He took leave of his companions and again crept down to the picket line. This time he took care not to incur the hail of the picket.

Crouching in the underbrush, Jack watched the picket in his march. He waited for him to reach the end of his beat.

Then, on his stomach, he wriggled nearer the line. Several times the picket made his route.

Each time Jack wriggled nearer. In the darkness the high brush kept him well concealed. Once again the picket walked to the end of his beat.

With the swiftness of thought Jack drew himself across the beat and into the cover of some shrubs. All was done with comparative silence, and it was a difficult feat.

The picket passed again within a yard of him. Jack wriggled a little further each time. Presently he got upon his feet.

His uniform was somewhat soiled, but for that he cared not. He was inside the enemy's line.

He arose and walked boldly forward. The glare of the camp fires were before him. He saw the stacked arms of the troops and the men lounging in the regimental streets.

All presented the scene of a large army encampment. Jack took it in with interest. Nearby the young Union officer saw his chance.

A young corporal was staggering along in the gloom. It was plain that he was a little under the influence of liquor.

In a moment Jack approached him.

"Hello, comrade!" he said. "Haven't you got a bit of whiskey with you?"

"Eh?" exclaimed the tipsy soldier as he fixed his leery gaze upon Jack. "What do you—hic—want whiskey for? Don't—hic—you see what it's done to me?"

"All right, comrade," said Jack. "You must have drank it all up."

"Yesh, an'—hic—I'm a heap sorry I ain't got more to drink. Hic—if I could drink one more pint I'd be dead sober. On my word—hic—yes, sir!"

"You'd be dead all right," said Jack. "It's a good thing for you. Say, where are the prisoners that were captured when we made camp here? A company of Union soldiers, I believe."

The tipsy corporal fixed his fishy eyes on Jack.

"Hic! Where have you been? Don't ye know we didn't catch 'em? They slipped away like a weasel. They say they are ther Fairdale Blues, an' their captain—hic—is the slickest officer in ther whole Union Army."

Jack felt a thrill.

He had gained one important point. Moreover, his delight was beyond expression that his brave boys had escaped. But, as if he could not altogether believe it, he asked:

"But, what about Ward Howell? Didn't he get hold of them?"

"Who's he? Hic! Oh, yesh, I know. He's a consarned

guerrilla! He was in here a few hours ago, and he swears to catch that company of Union eels if he has to lose a leg. Hic! I'll go you two to one he loses the leg—hic. I'm off, comrade! I've got to go to bed. Oh, how my head aches!"

And the tipsy corporal reeled away.

But Jack had gained his point. He had learned all that he desired to know. He knew Studley's force was over five thousand men. He knew that he was feeling his way to Leesburg.

Some new game was afoot. There was trouble ahead, and Jack knew that he must at once rejoin his company, and, if possible, stand ready for any emergency that might arise.

He did not linger after having gained this information. He accepted it as authentic, for he knew that a drunken man seldom fabricates, but will tell that which he might not tell in his sober senses.

Jack walked boldly down to the picket line. The guard glanced sharply at him.

"You cannot return without the countersign," he said.

"What is it?" asked Jack boldly.

"You must go to headquarters for it."

"All right!" said Jack lightly, and walked away into the gloom. He lost no time in making his way back to the spot where he had left Hal and Jean.

They were awaiting him and Hal eagerly cried:

"Well, what luck, comrade?"

"The best of luck!" replied Jack, and he detailed that which he had heard. The others listened with interest.

"Well," exclaimed Hal. "Certainly, that is a relief to know that the boys did not fall into the hands of the enemy. But that does not signify that they may not yet."

"That is true!"

"It was clever work on the part of Lieutenant Gray to extricate his men from such a scrape," said Hal. "But now, where are we to look for them, Jack?"

"That is a question," said the young captain. "On the whole, I think we might as well give up seeking them for the present and perhaps devote our time to the attempt to rescue Miss Belcourt."

"That is right," agreed Hal. "Walter has proved himself able to keep the boys out of trouble. I think it a good plan."

Jean Lecompte was eager and ready to guide them back to the swamp. So they at once set out.

For some ways they went on without incident. Then they came to a highway which they decided was the road to Guilford from Buxton's plantation.

It was necessary to follow this for a ways, which they proceeded to do. They had traversed perhaps one hundred yards of the highway when suddenly a voice came out of the gloom:

"Halt and surrender! You are surrounded and cannot escape!"

For one moment the three were dumbfounded. Then a cry of joy escaped Hal. He had recognized that voice.

"Why, it's Joe Champneys!" he cried. "Joe, don't you know me! It's Hal!"

"Hurrah!" shouted Joe as he came rushing forward. "By the great snakes! Where did you come from? We gave you up for lost. The last we heard of you Howell had hung you."

"We escaped. Where are the rest of the boys?"

"In camp on the other side of that ridge. I took you for a Confederate scout and put up a bluff that you were surrounded. Hooray! And Captain Clark all safe, too! Won't the boys be happy!"

"They can't know how happy we are, Joe," said Jack. "We have had a tight pinch. But for our friend Jean here we would be in for a slip noose in the morning."

It is needless to say that the Blues were transported with delight when their captain and lieutenant walked safely into camp.

"We were in despair," said Walter Gray. "I hardly knew what to do when a young woman brought word from the house that you had been carried off by Howell. We gave pursuit, but we could get not the least trace of you. Then word came that Studley was moving up toward Buxton's, and we got out just in time. We had a running fight and lost five of our boys."

"You certainly have done bravely!" cried Jack. "You deserve great praise. Howell went back with six hundred men to annihilate you."

"We saw nothing of him."

"No, because you had changed base. But all has come out well. We have escaped by the best of luck."

"Had we not better withdraw in the face of so much danger?"

"Withdraw?" exclaimed Jack. "No, not yet! I am going to have Howell if such a thing is possible. Then Miss Belcourt must be rescued."

At this the boys cheered. They admired the pluck of their young captain. They were ready to stand by him.

Their position was one which they had chosen more from necessity than aught else.

There were bands of Confederates engaged in scouring the country for them. At any moment they might run upon one of these.

Jean Lecompte was delighted when Jack made him a corporal in the company of Blues, to take the place of one of the boys who had been killed.

The little Frenchman had shown that he was true blue, and Jack was ready at once to trust him.

But it need hardly be said that all were well exhausted and nigh dead from lack of sleep.

So they were glad to roll themselves up in their blankets and yield to Morpheus. They slept until the sun was up.

Reveille was not beaten, for the sound of the drum might attract the attention of the enemy. But the boys were all up and turned out for the morning roll call.

After mess Jack and Hal held a consultation as to the next best course to pursue. They climbed a little eminence near to view the country.

"It is my opinion," said Hal, "that we will do well to proceed at once to Black Swamp. We can hide in its recesses and trust to some chance to entrap Howell."

"It is the plan we will adopt," said Jack. "Give the order to advance."

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

But even as Jack spoke Hal clutched his arm and gasped: "Look there! We are lost!"

At the foot of the eminence a gray line was seen bursting from the woods. The crack of muskets was heard and bullets came hissing through the air.

The Blues had instantly deployed. But Jack at once ordered a retreat.

Back across the highway and over a ridge they went in good order, answering the fire of the foe, who were coming on at the charge.

It was an exciting time.

Jack Clark knew that all depended upon reaching some unassailable point at once. It was not easy to select this.

The Confederates were determined to overtake the Blues. Their officers waved their swords and urged them on.

But Jack's little company, though outnumbered five to one, were giving the foe a hard fight. Men dropped in the gray ranks rapidly.

But still they came on. There was no sign of the white feather.

For over half a mile of the undulating country the Blues retreated, and the hot fight went on.

Then the Boys in Blue came to a rail fence, just at the brow of a long ridge. Jack deployed his men along this.

"Stand fast, boys!" he shouted. "This is our one chance. We must hold this ridge or be defeated. Don't give up! The Blues may die, but never surrender!"

A ringing cheer went up.

"Never surrender!"

Then the Confederate column came charging up the ascent. The commands of their officers could be plainly heard.

"Now we've got 'em, boys! Give it to 'em! They can't go further!"

"Steady, boys!" cried Jack. "Hold your fire until the word is given! Steady, all!"

Up came the bristling line of gray. Their bayonets glittered in the sun. It was a sight to terrify any but a brave heart.

"Hold them, boys!" adjured Jack, in ringing tones of command. "Wait for the word. Now! Ready! Fire!"

A line of flame leaped from the muzzles of the Blues' muskets. The gray line wavered and halted. Once more the order went up for the second line of fire:

"Aim! Fire!"

Crash! The storm of bullets shattered the line of gray. It wavered, melted and was in confusion. In an instant Jack saw the opportunity:

"Up, boys!" he shouted. "Give them the steel! Charge bayonets!"

Over the rail fence went the cheering line of blue. With irresistible force they swept down the incline.

The Confederate column, decimated and shattered, could not stand such a charge. They broke and made a wild dash for life.

Wisely the Blues followed them only to the foot of the hill. Then they reformed and returned to the summit.

The Confederates were scattered widely, and it would be a long time before they could reform. So Jack again assumed the retreat.

This time they were not harassed by the foe. Soon the lowlands of the Black Swamp came into view.

"Hurrah!" cried Hal. "Once we get into the swamp, we can hide safely and defy the Confederates."

"We will get there as quickly as possible," said Jack. "We will enter from this side and select some high ridge or knoll in the swamp for a camping place."

Soon the Blues were in the edge of the great swamp.

It must not be understood that Black Swamp was altogether a morass. It was simply a tract of very low boggy land, with here and there dry elevations. It was honeycombed with paths and rough cordway roads, making a positive labyrinth.

When the verge of the swamp was reached Jack posted pickets. About a quarter of a mile within the confines of the swamp a high and dry place was found for the camp.

The boys quickly made rude shelters of bark and boughs, for they had lost their tents. They soon had camp fires going, and for the first time felt comparatively secure.

Yet this was really far from the case. They were in a land of dangers untold. On every hand were foes.

There was no chance for reinforcements. They must fight their way out of it should it become necessary to get out.

As soon as camp was made Jack and Hal decided to do a little reconnoitering. They left the camp and struck out for the verge of the swamp.

They passed the picket line and soon mounted a nearby eminence. No sign of a foe could be seen.

To the north lay the region intervening to Leesburg. This had been fought over by small detachments of both armies.

It was disputed ground, and it was hard to say to which side it belonged.

To the east was the region extending to the Potomac. This was mostly occupied by the Union forces.

To the south was the long Confederate line extending to Manassas, and beyond. Breastworks and redoubts, rifle pits and abattis frowned all along that front.

The position held by the Fairdale Blues was, if anything, just inside the line. The northern end or flank was but thinly guarded.

Studley's brigade was the main body of Confederate troops. If it was true that the Union general, McCurdy, was coming to attack Studley, then all this region was likely to be the scene of hard fighting.

And the Blues would be literally in the centre of it, as well as Howell and his band of guerrillas.

But Jack was not considering this as a factor to directly concern or much interest him.

He was on special service for the President, and this was to capture or hang the villain, Ward Howell.

But, as the two young officers stood on the eminence, they were in the shelter of a clump of hazel. This fact had proved their salvation.

For, as Hal turned and suggested that they return to the swamp, Jack gave a startled and hushed cry:

"By Jove! We're trapped!"

"Eh?" exclaimed Hal. "What do you mean?"

"Look yonder!"

The boy captain pointed to the foot of the slope, and between them and the swamp what they saw caused them to stand aghast and horrified.

A line of Confederate troops had suddenly emerged from the forest and extended itself along the base of the hill.

The boys were cut off from a return to their comrades.

It was a thrilling and intensely dangerous situation. For a moment the boys were too astounded to act.

Then Jack gave way to wonderment.

Where had these troops come from so suddenly? What was their purpose in selecting this position?

He could see that they were equipped for battle. They were in light marching order and were keeping silent.

But Hal and Jack knew well that the danger of their position was too great to admit of delay.

They must change position at once or the result might be serious indeed. The foe would certainly send scouts or skirmishers to the top of this hill.

At once they hastened down the other side, keeping the path which led through the deepest undergrowth.

They soon reached the further base of the hill.

Every moment they were widening the distance between them and their company in the swamp. Jack realized well the possibility of their pickets being discovered.

This would mean trouble at once. Of course, the Blues would have the advantage if attacked, but Jack could not feel just ready yet for a fight. He would rather avoid it.

The boys crept on until suddenly a sound came to their ears which caused them to halt.

It was the sound of footsteps coming along a path which they now noticed for the first time.

Jack and Hal crouched low and waited. They had not long to wait.

A tall figure came up the path. At sight of him the boys gave a start. He was recognized by both.

A tall powerfully built man he was, wearing a coonskin cap and dressed in the garb of a Western scout.

"It is Slocum, the Confederate scout," whispered Hal. "He is as keen as a ferret and has the instinct of the fox. Look out that he does not spot us!"

The boys kept silence while the famous scout passed.

Not until he had passed from sight and hearing did they draw a breath of relief.

Then they arose undecided for a moment what to do. Which way should they go?

There seemed no alternative but to follow the path behind Slocum. There was a risk in this.

But to go in the opposite direction would hardly be safe. So along the path they silently sped.

A little ways beyond the eminence they left it and turned into the deep woods of oak and hickory. They pushed on in the undergrowth, which came up to their waists.

They were making their way rapidly as possible through this, hoping to skirt the Confederate line, when suddenly Hal gave a faint cry and dropped down in the underbrush.

Jack did the same.

They were not a moment too soon. It seemed as if the woods became suddenly alive with Confederate soldiers.

Straight toward the spot where the boys were they came. Jack and Hal crept away through the undergrowth until they reached a fallen log.

Jack rolled quickly over the log, and to his surprise went down to his shoulders in a swamp hole. Before he could give warning Hal was beside him.

"Whew!" whispered the young lieutenant. "Here is a go for us. I guess we've found the bottom, though, Jack!"

"Yes, and the water is clear. It is surely the safest place we could find to hide in."

"That's right!"

The two boys crouching under the log peered above it. They now beheld a surprising scene.

Two Confederate officers of high rank were in the foreground. Beside them was Slocum, the Confederate scout. He held a paper in his hand, which seemed to be a plan of some kind.

"This is the spot to lie in wait," he said. "Colonel Foster, of General McCurdy's Brigade, with six hundred men, will pass here in three hours from now. They will be easily trapped if you care to arrange it."

Crouching low in the water under the fallen log, Jack Clark and his companion heard every word of the plan of ambuscade proposed by Slocum, the scout, to the Confederate officers.

The revelation was a thrilling one. They listened spell-bound.

CHAPTER VII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

"Slocum," said one of the officers who was called General Wade by the scout, "you are sure of this being the route taken by the Yankees?"

"I am, General Wade!"

"You think Colonel Foster carries full despatches concerning McCurdy's next movement upon us?"

"I am sure of it!"

"What do you think, Major Cleburn? Shall we make the ambuscade?"

"By all means!" replied the other officer.

"Then it is settled! I will give the word to my men to take up their position in these oaks. For the rest, we will trust to the God of battles."

"And that will not be in vain."

They now withdrew out of earshot. All this Hal and Jack had listened to with interest. With all the rest, it added intensely to the peculiarity of their position.

They were hidden in a swamp hole under a log.

To remain there any great length of time would be unpleasant, if not dangerous. They must get out at any cost.

For in a few moments these woods would be the scene of the ambuscade. To participate in it was far from the purpose of either of the young officers.

So at once they began to make a move to this effect.

Carefully Jack made his way to the other side of the swamp hole. He crept silently out and into the undergrowth.

Hal followed him.

Why they were not discovered was ever after a matter of mystery. The Confederates were not one hundred yards away.

But they did get out and soon were making rapid tracks from the spot. When they were assured that they had reached a safe distance, Jack paused.

"Hold on, Hal. Let's get our breath."

"I'm willing, Jack!"

"I'm nearly blown!"

"So am I!"

"I say, that is a terrible thing. We cannot see Foster and his men ambushed!"

"By no means!"

"But—"

"What?"

"How are we going to prevent it?"

Jack was thoughtful a moment. He recalled that the Union troops must necessarily advance from the east. This would bring them along the southern base of the hill they had lately left.

"Well?" asked Hal again.

"I think if we go back on our tracks and keep an easterly route we shall meet them."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Very good! Let us go on. But I'd like to ask you a question."

"What?"

"What are Foster and six hundred men doing so far inside the Confederate line or front? Is it not a foolhardy thing?"

"Well," replied Jack, "it might be explained in several ways. In the first place, it is not impossible that neither Foster nor McCurdy knows of the presence of the foe in this locality. Again, it is possible that they think it best to feel the way in behind Black Swamp to see if it would be feasible to raid the country beyond."

"They are likely to find that out."

"That is true, and to their sorrow, if they are permitted to go on. But you and I are to block that game."

"If we have luck!"

"Yes."

The two young officers ran on rapidly. The day was rapidly passing. They had been long away from their comrades, who were certain to feel apprehensive.

Jack knew that they ought to return soon, or at least send back word. But at present this was not possible.

On they ran.

They got beyond the eminence. The country was now more level. Suddenly they saw that which thrilled them.

It was the flashing of sunlight upon steel bayonets. Then suddenly a couple of skirmishers in blue appeared before them.

"Who are you!" was the hail, "friends or foes? We assure you we are the former, as you wear the blue!"

"Are you of Colonel Foster's regiment?" asked Jack.

"Yes."

"Then we warn you to turn back!"

"Turn back?"

"Yes, on peril of your lives!"

"Humph!" said the skirmisher. "You'll have to see the colonel about that. We have orders to advance."

"We will wait here until your colonel comes along!"

And the boys did so. This was not for some time. But presently, when the advance guard had passed, Colonel Foster, on a black horse, came up.

"We must warn you that you are marching into an ambuscade!" said Jack. "Order your men to halt at once!"

"An ambuscade!" said Foster, incredulously. "What do you mean? There isn't a Confederate within twenty miles of here!"

"That is where you are deceived!"

"What force is ahead of us?"

"A brigade of General Studley's, under the command of General Wade and Major Cleburn."

"The deuce! Are you telling the truth?"

"Do we look like falsifiers?"

"No! I cannot say that you do. But who are you, and what are you doing in this part of the country?"

"I am Jack Clark, captain of the Fairdale Blues, and this is my first lieutenant, Hal Martin. We are in this region on special service, which consists of the attempt to capture Ward Howell, the guerrilla."

Foster dismounted from his horse. His face lit up eagerly.

"The deuce! Are you Jack Clark, of the Fairdale Blues?" cried Foster. "Well, I am glad to see you and to know you. I have heard much of you."

"I am also glad to know you, too, Colonel Foster."

"You say that we are going into an ambuscade?"

"Yes."

"Where are your men?"

"In Black Swamp. We have been dodging the foe for the past few days. We have once been in their hands as prisoners."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Foster. "I will order a halt at

once. I am marching to establish an outpost in the rear of this same Black Swamp."

"That will be impossible."

"You believe it?"

"I know it!"

"Why?"

"Well, this region is alive with Confederates. General Studley has complete possession of every part of it."

"Whew! I might have gone into a literal death trap!"

"You will, if you go ahead."

"That settles it," said Foster. "I will send back a despatch that we can go no further than this point to establish an outpost. I will hold my command here."

At once Foster gave the order to halt. The regiment made preparation to encamp and Foster gave orders that in trenches be thrown up.

"I cannot thank you enough, gentlemen, for this service," said Foster. "I am positive that you have saved me from annihilation. To-morrow General McCurdy will send me reinforcements. If the foe makes attack I shall be ready for them."

"I am glad to know that," said Jack. "Now I think we will go back to our own camp."

"You are trying to capture Howell?"

"Yes."

"Can I give you any assistance?"

"Not at present. If I should get mixed up in a hot fight with him I might want to send for help."

"Well, you shall have it."

Jack and Hal now took their leave. They hastened away across the fields to the north. They did not dare to attempt entering the swamp from the point they had left it.

Cautiously they worked their way around, and soon had reached the lowland and then by means of a path which Jean Lecompte had shown them they got back to camp.

Even as they reached there the sound of distant firing was heard. They knew what it meant.

Failing to draw Foster into the ambuscade, Wade and Cleburn had gone out to openly attack the Union colonel.

For some time the sounds of battle were lively. Then they died away.

Hal and Jack were curious to know how the affair had resulted. Jean Lecompte volunteered to go out and ascertain.

The little Frenchman was a clever scout. It was easy for him to thread his way through the swamp to a point from whence he could see all.

He returned with favorable news.

"The Confederates have retired," he said. "The Union men hold their position."

"Good!" cried Jack. "I'll bet that Foster will yet gain his position back of the swamp. If he does it will cut off Howell, and we will hold him like a rat in a trap."

With which he sprung up hastily.

"But, shame on us!" he cried. "We are losing all our sense of chivalry. One of the fairest young women in the South is in deep trouble. We must go to her rescue."

"Aye!" cried Hal. "Miss Belcourt must be saved!"

Jack's plans for intercepting Howell were systematic. He sent small parties of his best men to different points in the swamp to wait and watch for the outlaw to pass.

At any time if he was attended by a small escort he was to be attacked, and, if possible, captured.

In the meantime, Jack and Hal realized that Miss Belcourt must, if possible, be rescued.

If this guerrilla chief should carry out his threat of compelling her to marry him, at once, it might be too late to save her. So the two young officers decided to undertake this task personally.

They left the encampment in the hands of Second Lieutenant Walter Gray, who had proven his ability many times.

Then they equipped themselves for a trip into the swamp. Jean Lecompte had agreed to be their guide.

So that night, in utter darkness, they set out. It was by no means an alluring undertaking.

Floundering in the mire and dirty waters of the swamp, climbing over rotten logs and threading narrow paths through the fens, they grew weary and sick. But they kept on until finally they saw the gleam of firelight upon water.

Jean Lecompte brought them to the shores of a small lagoon.

Beyond this were fires. The murmur of voices could be heard and figures seen moving in the firelight.

"Yonder is the den of Howell, m'sieur," said Jean. "It is an island in this lagoon. It can only be reached from one point by a drawbridge."

Jack saw at once that the guerrilla had here an ideal hiding place.

It was almost unassailable. In fact, but for Jean's guidance Jack would have felt doubt about finding it.

But here they were within sight of the den of the outlaw. But they might as well have been a hundred miles away.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE LION'S DEN.

At least, so this seemed to Jack and Hal. For there seemed absolutely no way to reach the island.

Of course, the bridge used by Howell was well guarded.

Then, to think of swimming the lagoon was no light matter.

"It is very deep," said Jean; "the water is very cold. It would not be easy to land without being seen!"

"Well," said Jack dubiously, "what can be done?"

For a time all were in doubt. Then Hal hit upon a plan.

"Why not make a raft of some of these logs?" he said. "We might float over there bye and bye where the water is widest and when the camp fires are low."

It seemed a feasible undertaking. After some discussion it was adopted.

Logs were silently rolled into the water. Across them other logs were placed, thus making a raft. Of course, there was some danger of the logs rolling and the raft collapsing.

But a certain amount of risk is necessary in any enterprise, as our adventurers were bound to admit.

It was after midnight ere the camp fires of the guerrillas began to burn low. Then all was ready.

The three Union soldiers lay flat on the raft.

Jack used a long and slender pole to push it along. Suddenly it was found that this would not touch the bottom.

There was nothing to do now but to let the raft drift.

And she did drift, as good fortune had it, straight for the island. A few moments later she bumped the shore.

The three youths got off the raft and stood on the island. They were at last in the stronghold of Howell, the guerrilla.

The island was a half mile in length and several hundred yards wide. Part of it was open and sandy. The rest of it was overgrown with cedars.

Jack and Hal now led the way on a tour of investigation.

Long rows of tents furnished the abodes of Howell's men. Before these burned the line of camp fires.

Most of these were low now, but some of them were still blazing. A few of the guerrillas were engaged in card playing.

Among these tents there was one, Jack felt sure, which housed Kitty Belcourt. He scanned them all.

And a little apart from the others he saw a large marquee tent. Even as the would-be rescuers gazed they saw the colored woman, Mammy Lou, emerge from the front of it.

"Ah!" whispered Hal. "That is where she is confined, Jack. But how can we reach her? How let her know?"

This was the problem.

Jack was in doubt regarding the colored woman. She would no doubt betray them to the outlaws.

Mammy Lou had threaded her way among the tents and was now out of sight. For a moment only Jack hesitated. Then he said:

"Make or break, I'm going to do it. Here goes, boys!"

He boldly crossed the intervening space and lifted the flap of the tent. He stood inside and the next moment beheld that which gave him a thrill.

The interior of the tent was cosy and comfortable. A divan occupied the centre. There were chairs and a table and parts of the tent were separated by walls of canvas into different rooms.

But what gave Jack the greatest start was the sight of a young woman, pallid and trembling, but yet beautiful and as haughty as ever.

Kitty Belcourt stared at the young Union officer for a moment.

"Am I dreaming?" she murmured. "Is it really you—is it Captain Clark?"

"It is, Miss Belcourt, and at your service," said Jack.

"Mercy! How did you get here?"

"Crossed the lagoon on a raft. Have no fear. I feel safe!"

"But—my soul! You are not safe. You will be seen and hanged. Oh, you do not know the power of that desperado!"

"Yes, I do. But we are going to beat it. That is true. We are here for that purpose!"

"You have come to save me?"

"Yes."

Her white lips moved as if in prayer. She trembled like an aspen.

"Is it possible to do so?" she whispered. "How can it be done?"

"Have courage!" said Jack. "Where is your colored woman?"

"She has gone to the commissary's tent."

"Is she to be trusted?"

Kitty shook her head.

"I do not think so," she said. "She is in with the gang. Oh, they are a lawless crew. Two men in blue were hanged an hour ago in my sight. Alas, that my people should have such an ally!"

"Well, he is a power with them. But we will soon terminate his career. Are you ready to go with us, Miss Belcourt?"

"I am ready and eager!"

"Then you will accompany me. We have a raft outside, on which we crossed the lagoon. If we can get back without hindrance you are saved!"

"Oh, thank heaven!" she breathed fervently. "It will be a joyful hour for me when I get out of that scoundrel's clutches!"

Jack knew well the risk he was taking. But he lifted the flap of the tent, saying:

"My arm, Miss Belcourt. We shall soon be beyond danger!"

Jack's steady nerve counted for much. They were compelled to pass within a few yards of one of the camp fires.

Several of the guerrillas lounged about it. But, as good fortune had it, they did not notice Jack and his fair charge.

Kitty was trembling like an aspen. Her fair face was pale and drawn. Every nerve was keyed to the utmost.

But still they kept on.

A moment more and they were near the bank of the lagoon. Here they met Hal and Jean Lecompte, who had been anxiously awaiting them.

"Thank heaven, you have come back safely," whispered Hal. "There can be no time to lose!"

"No! We must get away from here at once. As soon as Mammy Lou returns the alarm will be given."

In a moment they had crept down to the shore of the lagoon.

Jack assisted Kitty to get upon the raft. A moment more and they were drifting across the lagoon.

It seemed an age that the raft consumed in crossing that watery space. Then just as it touched the opposite shore a loud outcry was heard on the island.

The disappearance of the girl captive had been discovered.

"Quick!" whispered Jack as he leaped ashore. "We shall soon have them all about us like hornets!"

"That's right!" agreed Hal. "Pull her up closer, Jean. Now!"

The raft was pulled to the shore. But in doing so the logs rolled and for a moment it seemed as if all would be precipitated into the water.

But Jack seized Kitty by the waist and lifted her ashore.

The others sprung off the raft. Now there could be heard sounds of a great commotion on the island.

The escape of the young girl had been discovered. The rescuers, however, did not linger longer than necessary.

Jean led the way into the swamp. The signal guns could now be heard and they knew that they were being pursued.

At the same moment a startling sound more thrilling than anything else could be rose upon the night air.

It was the long, mournful bay of a blood-hound. It was taken up and repeated again and again by others.

The terrible trailers of death were on their track.

There was no dodging them. They were certain to be run down. But the rescuers knew that the hounds could be disposed of, though it would give their human pursuers the cue.

On they plunged through the swamp.

Kitty was not strong. The terrible mental strain of her captivity had weakened her.

Half-fainting she was obliged to halt. Jack and Hal drew their pistols. A great figure came leaping through the gloom.

It flew at them like a panther. Jack aimed and fired.

There was a howl of agony, a crashing in the bushes, a writhing and twisting and the hound lay dead.

But behind him came another, and still another. All fired, but missed.

Their pistols now were empty. One of the hounds sprung at Kitty, who was crouching at the foot of a tree.

Jack had pulled off his coat and wound it about his arm.

Quick as a flash he sprung before the savage brute. The great teeth of the hound closed upon his bandaged arm. The coat, however, caught the fangs.

Then, again and again, Jack's sword passed through the creature's body. The blood gushed in torrents, and Jack hurled the body of the great hound aside.

Jean Lecompte had engaged another with his knife. He thrust his blade full into the creature's jaws, and the hound rolled upon the ground howling in pain.

Hal had sheathed his sword in the breast of the fourth. Luckily, this was the last of the animals.

But, though the hounds were disposed of, the danger had only just begun. Behind them could be heard the crashing of the underbrush.

The guerrillas were close at hand.

This meant a deadly hand-to-hand battle. The rescuers hastily reloaded their pistols. In those early days of the Civil War the revolver, or rapid-fire pistol, was not known, and the big navy pistols loaded with powder and ball were alone in use.

After one discharge this pistol was of no use in a close encounter, for there was no time to reload.

To-day the sword and the knife, and even the bayonet, is considered obsolete. In those days the brunt of the fighting was done with these weapons.

Modern war is terrible enough, with its deadly engines of destruction. But it yet lacks the ferocious, bloody features of the warfare of earlier times.

But Jack Clark had no desire to meet the guerrillas in a hand-to-hand encounter if he could help it. He suddenly turned to Lecompte and said:

"Jean, Miss Belcourt must be rescued at any cost. You know the way of the swamp. Take her and push ahead to our camp. We will stay here and hold the foe at bay as long as we can."

The little Frenchman was loath to leave the scene.

But he was too well disciplined to disobey the orders of his superior officer. At once he turned and gave his arm to Miss Kitty.

They glided away into the gloom.

Jack and Hal, with drawn swords, awaited the coming of their foe. They could see dark figures swarming in the underbrush.

The next moment they were seen and bullets hissed past them.

CHAPTER IX.

EXCITING EVENTS.

What saved their lives at that moment was nothing less than the darkness and the poor aim of the foe.

The bullets sped harmlessly by. The next moment to fire would have been as fatal for the guerrillas as for our brave young defenders, for they were in such close quarters.

Jack's sword shot out like a tongue of flame. Yell after yell of agony went up, as he met one after another of the oncoming guerrillas.

One dropped after another with the sword thrusts. Those in advance were pushed forward by those in the rear.

So dark was it that they became confused, and even assaulted each other. Jack and Hal plied their swords with most deadly effect.

But human endurance could not maintain this long.

The press of numbers was too heavy. Fierce anathemas and cries filled the air. The guerrillas were savage.

"Kill 'em! Cut 'em down! Forward, there, ye cowards! Surround 'em!"

This was the very contingency the two young officers desired to avoid. So they at once fell back.

They knew not where they were going. To them the swamp was an enigma, and one path was not known from another.

But they kept falling back as rapidly as possible.

All things must have an end, and so a termination came to this terrible contest in the darkness of the swamp.

Suddenly, as Jack and Hal retreated, it seemed as if the ground dropped beneath their feet, and the next moment they went down into deep water.

When they came up, they of course instinctively struck out and swam. As good fortune had it they were easily within touching distance.

But all was an uproar about them.

Their pursuers had also fallen into the water hole. Some

could not swim and were bellowing lustily for help. Struggling, splashing figures were all about.

Jack looked up and saw the sky.

He could see so much of it that he knew the water hole was of no small area. The two young Union officers now struck out and swam easily.

They were quickly clear of their foes.

What had for a moment seemed a calamity, therefore seemed destined to become a matter greatly to their advantage.

Straight across the water hole, a distance of perhaps one hundred yards, they swam.

When they reached the opposite side they drew themselves out of the water and sank down under the branches of a swamp cedar. They were glad to rest.

The strain of the combat and of the swim had been most severe.

"Whew!" gasped Hal. "We stumbled into luck, Jack. If we hadn't tumbled into this place just as we did I believe they would have got us."

"You're right, comrade," said Jack, with a thrill of exultation. "Well, I think we may consider our expedition a success."

"I should say!"

"We have crept right into the lion's den and rescued one of his would-be victims. I do not see how we could ask for more."

"Certainly not! I only hope Jean gets out all safe with Miss Belcourt."

"I think we scarcely need have fears for that. He knows every inch of this swamp."

"So he does!"

"I wish we did! To tell the truth, I do not know where to go now."

"Nor I."

The two young officers were in a quandary. But they saw that some of the guerrillas were also swimming the water hole, so they decided to make a change of base.

They arose and wrung the water from their uniforms as well as they could. Fortunately they had not lost their swords.

They now plunged deeper into the swamp. In a few moments all sounds of pursuit had died out.

The boys kept on until suddenly they came to a high and dry elevation, or hummock, in the swamp.

They were deeply exhausted and wet to the skin. They crept up in the sands, and Jack said:

"We go no further to-night, Hal. We can get no idea of direction in this darkness. I propose we stay here."

"It is the best plan," agreed Hal. "I think I could sleep."

"Very good! First, let us take off our clothes and wring the water out of them."

This they proceeded to do. They hung them up on the bushes to dry. It was not pleasant to remain naked in the night air, but fortunately, it being November, there were no flies or mosquitoes to torture them.

An idea occurred to Jack. The sand was dry and warm. He burrowed in it and covered himself to his neck.

"This is as good a couch as we can find, Hal," he cried. "I am snug and comfortable. Try it yourself."

Hal did so, and was surprised to find how dry and warm he was. Thus with sand for their covering and their pillows, the two tired young soldiers slept.

And they slept well, for the sun was high in the heavens when they awoke.

They crawled out of their sandy beds and ran down to a little creek nearby to bathe.

They felt limber and fine when they came out of the cool water. The morning was a bracing one.

Their uniforms were dry, and they hastened to get into them. In fact, they were in every way restored.

"Now, if I only had a yard of hoe cake, a bit of 'possum stew and a yam, I think I could run fifty miles," cried Hal.

"So could I!" agreed Jack. "I don't see any chance of getting hoe cake about here, however. I fear we shall have to go back to camp."

"Can you guess what direction it is in?"

"No."

"Do you see that tall cypress? I believe I'll climb it and see what I can see."

"Good for you!"

Hal went up the tree like a monkey. He went to the topmost branches. From his perch he had an extended view.

For a great space to the north extended the great swamp. But in the other direction he saw with a start that it was not a half mile to the open country.

He saw a curling line of smoke just to the right. He felt a thrill.

"Here we are, Jack!" he shouted. "Our own camp is not a quarter of a mile away!"

"Hurrah!" cried Jack. "In what direction?"

"Dead west of us, by the sun."

"Good! We are in luck!"

This was indeed true. The two young officers had passed the night almost within hailing distance of their own camp. It is hardly necessary to say that they at once took a bee-

line through the swamp. In less than half an hour they saw the lines of rude huts built by the Blues.

Tom Peters was one of the first to see them coming, and he sent up a shout of delight, which brought all the rest of the boys out.

The reunion was a joyful one.

Jean Lecompte had already safely returned with Kitty Belcourt. The little Frenchman had been about to organize a party to go in quest of the two young officers.

Miss Belcourt herself welcomed them with many expressions of gratitude and joy. The boys were given a hearty breakfast by the camp cook. After this they felt decidedly better.

And now a number of questions arose.

The rescue of Kitty Belcourt had been a success. The young girl had expressed her gratitude in the deepest terms.

"I shall have a far different opinion of Northern soldiers in the future," she said. "I no longer can believe that all chivalry is confined to the South."

"We have been glad to serve you," said Jack, gallantly. "And we are still at your disposal, Miss Belcourt."

"I shall not burden you with my presence longer than to get safe escort back to the plantation," she said. "I hear that General Studley is in force there, and he will defend me against Howell. Moreover, I feel sure you and your brave company of Blues will yet run him to earth, as he deserves to be."

"We hope to, Miss Belcourt!"

"Although he is reputed to be fighting for the Confederacy, I am in nowise in sympathy with him, for I consider such allies as not at all to one's advantage."

"You are quite right. They are too often apt to prove treacherous."

"So I fancy! I hope and pray that the war will soon be ended. I cannot help but believe that it is all a great misunderstanding."

"It is, Miss Belcourt. It has divided families, broken up homes, estranged the best of friends and driven our whole nation to the bitterness of despair."

"Which is much to be regretted," said Miss Belcourt in a softened voice. "When the war is over many hearts will be reunited. Of one thing feel assured," she said with a peculiar thrill in her voice, "a Southern girl gives her heart but once. Have no fear but that she will be true. Some day you will be very happy."

Jack knew well what she meant, and his heart thrilled. They looked at each other and each knew that the other was thinking of Nellie Prentiss.

A short while later Jack, with four of his boys, went with Kitty as an escort to the edge of the swamp.

They dared not go further, for Wade and his men lay between them and the Buxton plantation. But Kitty had no fears other than of Howell, and he was not in the vicinity just then.

Jack watched her until he saw her hailed by the Confederate picket.

Then he turned and went back to his camp. When he reached there it was to find that things were in an excited state.

Word had just come that one of the pickets had been fired on. Howell's men were coming in from the swamp.

It needed no great foresight to teach Jack that his position at present was a most dangerous one.

With Howell on one side and Wade just outside the swamp, he and his little company were literally between two fires. The risk of this was plain to see.

Jack saw that something must be done instantly. He did not hesitate.

At once the camp was broken. The boys were in luck in one respect, and this was in having Jean Lecompte for a guide.

The little Frenchman was familiar with every corner of the swamp. He led them now into a road which, he explained, would take them out of the jaws of the trap in which they were.

Their course was eastward, and they skirted the swamp until sundown. If the guerrillas were pursuing them nothing was heard of them.

But just at sundown the distant sound of firing was heard. An engagement of some sort was taking place not more than a mile distant.

Just then two of the skirmishers came into camp with a prisoner.

He was a type of mountaineer, low browed, keen eyed and sly. Jack at once interrogated him.

"I reckon that's a fight over yonder," he said laconically. "Studley's movin' up ter drive ther Yankees into ther Potomac."

It was discovered a few moments later that this was false. The very reverse was the truth.

McCurdy had come up with his whole force and was driving in Studley's skirmish line. Just then a distant sullen boom was heard, and a shell went screeching skyward.

It meant that the warriors were to see some lively fighting.

The firing presently died out, and the two armies waited and watched each other, looking all the while for the dawn.

Jack questioned the mountaineer more closely:

"You are a Georgian?" he asked.

"How do ye know that?"

"I know it by your dress and manner."

"Sharp, ain't ye?"

"Oh, no! Only a little perspicacious, that's all. Do you know Ward Howell?"

The prisoner's face changed to a livid hue. His eyes held a strange and deadly light.

"What?" he gritted. "Do I know that sarpint? Well, I should say I did, an' a heap, too. I'm only livin' to git my grip on his cussed windpipe. Thar'll be an end of ther blackest traitor an' villain that ever lived. An' that's a father's vengeance!"

CHAPTER X.

THE PAROLE.

Jack was indeed astonished by this thrilling declaration of the fellow. He looked at him in surprise.

"So!" he exclaimed. "You are not on good terms with Howell?"

"I reckon not!" curtly.

"What are your reasons? He is fighting for the Confederacy, as well as you!"

"You kin know, stranger, that it's hard fer me to stand up in ther ranks alongside of sech a pizen varmint. But some time he'll go back on the government an' then if I don't git him they will."

"You interest me greatly," said Jack. "Will you not tell me in what way he wronged you?"

The mountaineer's eyes assumed a far-away wistful light.

"Yas," he said. "I'll tell ye, jest to show ye what a mean thing human natur is. My name is John Boughton. I live up in ther highlands of North Carolina. No, I ain't a Georgian, though I jined a Georgia regiment."

"I lived up whar ther air is pure an' life ain't what it is in ther big centres of ther kentry. Some on 'em feel pleased ter call us poor white trash. Ther niggers hate us an' we hate them."

"But I'll tell yer one thing that no man in this kentry has a better family tree than John Boughton. My ancestors came to Virginny when Jamestown was settled. Andrew Boughton was a knight in the days of King James. I kin trace ther hull family history an' never a Boughton has been jailed or guilty of a bad deed."

"I'm ther last of ther line an' thar'll be no more. My grandfather was victimized by a scoundrel an' lost ther family estate on ther James. My father was poor but proud. He couldn't bear ter live among ther people whar he had once been a leader. So we went up into ther mountains of Carolina."

"Thar one by one all dropped away. I was left with my darling wife Editha an' my darter Edna. She was to me the apple of my eye. Stranger, you don't know bekase ye never saw her, but ye've seen the rose in its bloom, ye've seen ther lily in its fairest divinity, but they could not match with her.

"As free as the mountain air, as pure as its snow, as happy and laughin' as its breezes, was her spirit until this leper, this curse upon the face of nature, in ther shape of Ward Howell, came along and turned his poison breath upon the tender flower.

"It wilted! It sickened and died. Betrayed by his smooth tongue, his stories of the outside world, his lies and his hypocrisy, she fell in love with and married him. He killed her with brutality. Her death caused that of my beloved wife. Alone I stood on the threshold of my mountain home, bereft of all that life held dear, wretched, alone and forlorn. Do ye know what that is, captain? Can you imagine how I felt? Can you wonder that I live only to face that viper once more, only to throttle him, to crush the breath from his foul body and gratify what men call revenge, but what God cannot deny me as justice?"

Quivering and sallow, the mountaineer faced the boy captain. Jack and Hal, as well as others present, had listened spellbound.

"Your experience has been a sad one, Mr. Boughton," said Jack. "You have our profound sympathy. It may interest you to know that we are on special service to hunt down and hang this villain."

John Boughton's face was illumined.

"Is that true, captain?"

"It is!"

"An' you are huntin' him to ther death?"

"Yes."

"I say, can't ye give me ther chance to help ye? I can't fight agin ther Confederacy, fer its life is a part of my religion. But I'll do anything to hunt down Howell!"

"I don't know that you can help us at present," said Jack, "unless, possibly, you could assist us as guide."

"I know every inch of this kentry."

"Very good! But you cannot fight against the Confederacy. That is what we are doing in chasing Howell down."

The mountaineer hesitated.

"If I thought Jeff Davis would uphold that scoundrel," he said, "I'd never raise my hand again for the Southern cause."

"It is hardly likely that he would defend him," said Jack. "No fair-minded man could do it. There are equally as great scoundrels fighting on the Union side."

"Oh, it's hard!" said Boughton, clenching his hands. "I

have sought him all these years, and now, when I have found him, I am a prisoner and unable to consummate my plans of revenge."

Jack gave a start.

"What say you, Boughton, if I give you your freedom?" The mountaineer's face lit up.

"Do ye mean it? What surety can I give ye?" he asked.

"Your parole!" said Jack. "I believe you are a man of honor. Swear never to fight again against the United States. You shall have your freedom, and we will help you all we can to gain your revenge."

The mountaineer hesitated. He looked at Jack and the others. His voice choked a bit, and he said:

"Ther war never ought to hev been. I know thar are good people in ther North, as well as ther South. Durn me, hyar's my hand! You Yankees are all right. I'll take ther oath, as ye request."

Jack gripped Boughton's hand and said:

"I think it is the best thing you can do. Hold up your right hand."

Boughton at once complied.

"You do solemnly swear that you will never again raise your hand against the government of the United States and that you will for the rest of your life obey her laws and respect the Constitution?"

"I swear!" said Boughton. So the oath was taken. How well the mountaineer kept it we have yet to see.

Jack gave him escort beyond the lines. Boughton at once plunged into the swamp.

"Now," cried Hal, "what is the next move in the game?"

"Ordinarily I would advise joining McCurdy in his attack on Studley. But that is hardly the move under the present circumstances. We must adhere to our original plan and try to capture Howell."

"Then we will go back to the swamp."

"Yes! I propose that we enter the swamp at a point above here, where we will not be hemmed in. From thence we can emerge at will and with safety."

"That is a good plan."

Darkness was rapidly falling. The Blues now at double-quick pressed forward to the point chosen by Jack.

It was a spot just in the verge of the great morass, and where they could watch the approach of an enemy from any direction but that of the swamp.

Of course, there was the possibility of being stumbled upon by any roving band of Confederates. But this was one of the chances of war.

The boys had no tents, but the night was fair and they simply rolled themselves in their blankets and slept on the ground.

As good fortune had it, the night passed with safety.

But during the night Jean Lecompte had taken an expedition into the swamp. The little Frenchman had even penetrated to the quarters of Howell himself.

Jean learned an important fact.

"The guerrillas are going to move down Goose Creek and make a dash for the supply train of McCurdy's army," he said.

"Is Howell acting under orders?"

"No, he is acting on his own responsibility, and his sole objective is plunder."

"Very good," said Jack promptly. "It is plain that we must checkmate him."

Jean looked inquiringly at Jack.

"Oh, m'sieur capitaine," he said, "I do not see how that will be done!"

"I will show you," said Jack. "If he leaves the swamp he leaves behind him his own base of supplies."

"But he and his band can live on the country."

"Very good! Then we will do the same. We will harass his rear. Just as he proposes to harass the rear of General McCurdy's army."

The little Frenchman's eyes lit up.

"Oh, that is like Napoleon," he said. "He always struck a blow in the enemy's rear. Half the battle is won!"

"Very good! Now, Jean, keep watch and let me know when Howell leaves the swamp."

"Oui, m'sieur. I will obey!"

Jean hurried away. Hal, who had been an earnest listener, now interposed.

"I say, Jack!"

"Well?"

"Your plan is all right, but why not shorten matters by attacking Howell when he leaves the swamp?"

"He will be in much heavier force. We could not cope with him. Moreover, a surprise is always better than a direct attack."

Hal bowed and said:

"I can see your idea, captain. It is far better than mine, I am ready to admit."

It was not long before Jean returned and said:

"Howell is coming out of the swamp. He has six hundred mounted men."

"Mounted!" exclaimed Jack dubiously. "That is an advantage over us. If we had horses——"

"M'sieur, it is easy to get horses enough for your company," cried Jean excitedly.

"What?" exclaimed Jack. "Do you mean that? I would mount my boys at once if I could have the horses!"

"I will tell, m'sieur! Howell keeps many horses in the

swamp retreat. He leaves many extra mounts behind him when he rides out. I will lead you to his stables. You will find horses enough there to mount this whole company, I am sure."

"Capital!" cried the boy captain, wildly. "Jean, you are a wonder! But has he left a heavy guard at his camp in the swamp?"

"Perhaps a score. No more!"

"That is enough! Take fifty men. I will place them under your command. Bring out one hundred horses, and, if possible, their equipments."

"It shall be done, m'sieur!" cried the daring little Frenchman. "It is as good as done already."

And in a few moments half of the Blues, under Jean's command, set out into the swamp.

CHAPTER XI.

A BOLD DASH—THE END.

Of course, this left the Blues with their force greatly weakened. But Jack had no fear of an immediate attack.

He was particularly anxious to avoid anything of the sort, for a sharp fight, with the loss of any considerable number of his men, would hamper him seriously in his future operations.

The remnant of the Blues kept well under cover in the swamp.

From an eminence near, Jack and Hal saw a long line of the guerrillas emerge from the swamp at a point a mile distant.

They rode away to the eastward. It was Howell and his party.

Jack could well imagine that the guerrilla chief was furious at the escape of Kitty Belcourt. There was little doubt but that some of his men received condign punishment for it.

When Howell and his crew had disappeared in the distance, Jack and Hal returned to wait anxiously for the return of Jean and his party.

An hour later the sounds of firing was heard far in the swamp.

"They have reached the den of the guerrillas," said Hal. "Now we shall soon know what success Jean will meet with."

"I feel sure that he will succeed," said Jack, "for he is a bright fellow and a very clever tactician and strategist. If he once gets a foothold he will rapidly win his way to a high standing."

After a while the firing died out.

This meant that Jean had either met with success or he had met with failure. The boys hoped it was the former.

It seemed an age until suddenly a loud shout was heard, and from the swamp rushed one of the advance guard.

In an instant he was surrounded by the rest of the boys.

"Yes, yes!" he cried. "We have the horses. We have burned and destroyed the guerrillas' stronghold and secured the horses. There are a number of prisoners."

The Blues cheered wildly.

This was certainly news of the most cheering nature. The next moment from the swamp rode the members of the expedition with long lines of horses in lead.

Little Jean Lecompte had won praise and glory in that moment. He was cheered to the echo.

As nothing could be done with the prisoners, they were freed.

They were villainous-looking fellows and doubtless deserved hanging. But Jack could not bring himself to the gruesome task.

It did not take long for the boys to get into the saddles.

All were good riders, and they made a natty appearance. Jack Clark, at their head, gave the order:

"Quick trot! Forward!"

And away they dashed upon this new and most exciting expedition. They were soon on the trail of Howell.

It was easy enough to follow, for a cavalcade of six hundred men always leaves plenty of traces behind.

On they rode until Black Swamp and Buxton's plantation were many miles behind. Of course, Howell's plan to strike in the rear of McCurdy's forces meant a long detour.

And a long one it proved.

The day was nearly spent when the sound of distant firing was heard. Riding to the summit of a hill, the Blues saw that which gave them a thrill.

Down from a gap in the hills there was descending a long train of wagons.

Small detachments of Union cavalry rode beside them. It was easy to see that this was the supply train of McCurdy's army.

And, divided into three squads of two hundred men in each, Howell's band had descended upon the train. It looked as if their victory was an easy one.

For the Union cavalry was scattered, the line of wagons was broken, the horses becoming wild and uncontrollable. The Confederate descent was like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky.

There was no time to call up reinforcements from the front. The main body of the army was miles ahead.

What was to be done must be done quickly. Already the guerrillas had begun to plunder and fire the train.

Jack rose in the saddle and called out to his little band: "Now, Blues! Forward! Cut them down!"

It was a daring thing for that little body of youths to attack a force six times their own number.

But the Blues did not reckon upon this. They had been ordered forward and that was all they cared for.

Down they rushed like a whirlwind. The first squad of the guerrillas received their attack with utter amazement. The Blues had obtained sabres at Howell's camp.

For a moment there was a terrific mix-up. The guerrillas fought furiously.

But the charge of the Blues was so fierce and so determined that they were literally carried off their feet. They were hurled back among the wagons and sabred right and left by the Blues.

Scattering this first squad of the foe, the Blues dashed right through the train and went crashing into the next.

Again there was a furious mix-up. Again the Blues scattered the guerrillas and swung their horses to attack Howell himself, who had charge of the next squad.

But just at that moment a wild ringing hurrah came from the other end of the train.

A great troop of Union cavalry, with the famous Fitzpatrick at their head, came sweeping down. The outlaws would have been enveloped in another moment.

But the wary Howell, seeing that his game was up, wheeled and, with a handful of his followers, sped away. Jack saw this move just in time.

Without waiting to make explanation or to meet the Union cavalry, Jack and his boys started in pursuit. Howell left the turnpike and took to the fields.

There now ensued a race of the most thrilling character. The horses were of the genuine Southern breed and took the fences with the greatest of ease.

Howell had headed for the hills.

If he should reach them, doubtless he would have a great advantage and might even manage to escape. Jack meant to prevent this if he could.

But the long ride to cut off the wagon train had consumed the most of the day.

The night was near at hand. Shadows were already beginning to fall. On went pursued and pursuers.

Jack rose in his stirrups and urged his horse to the utmost. But the best efforts of the Blues did not avail.

The guerrillas reached the hills and disappeared in one of the cuts. When the Blues reached the spot they knew not which way to turn.

The ground was of a character which left no trail. There were turns and twists and wooded dells and glens, and it was impossible to tell where the guerrillas had gone.

For the moment they had certainly eluded the Blues. Jack employed every device of which he could think to track them.

With the pall of night shutting down about them, the Blues finally came to a halt. There seemed no alternative but to give up the quest.

"They have certainly slipped us," said Hal. "We are in hard luck!"

"So we are!" agreed Jack, dispiritedly. "If we had overtaken Howell this time our game would have been won. We could have gone back to Coon's Ferry and reported for further orders."

"Never mind," said Tom Peters, the fat little corporal. "We shall catch him yet. We have only to keep right at it."

"That is the proper spirit," declared Hal. "I see no other plan but to camp here for the present, Jack."

"Very good!" agreed the young captain. "Although I am at a loss to know what we shall feed our horses on."

"Give them a chance to graze in yonder glen," said Peters. "They will find plenty of good feed."

This plan was adopted.

The horses were hobbled and turned out to graze in the glen. Then guards were posted and the boys were glad to seek sleep.

Somewhere in those pastures they knew that beyond a doubt Howell was doing the same. But as they did not know just where this place was, they were for the time quite safe.

There was little sleep, however, for Jack or Hal.

The two young officers were much chagrined and disappointed at the escape of Howell, whom they had counted upon surely capturing.

He had slipped them, and now it seemed like another hopeless task to again get track of him.

But with the rise of the sun all were up and partaking of their rations. Jack had decided to go on back to the open country and strike back for the Black Swamp.

He felt convinced that Howell would surely return to his den in the swamp, as it was not likely that he knew of its complete destruction.

Hal agreed with Jack in the plan, so the Blues were formed and marched away on the back trail.

But they had not gone half a mile and had entered a cut when the rattle of muskets was heard and two of the boys dropped in their tracks.

The fire came from a growth of scrub oaks alongside the cut. Jack instantly gave the order to fall back and deploy across the cut.

The firing was quite sharp now and the Blues answered. But, to Jack's surprise, the foe began to fall back.

He could see nothing of them and wondered greatly what was their strength. Something must be done.

His time was too valuable to waste the day in a bush fight. So the young captain finally gave the order:

"Fix bayonets!"

Just then, though, there was a heavy roar, and down the cut hurled a shell which burst beyond the Blues with frightful force.

This was enough for Jack. He saw that the foe had artillery, and was too well posted to make a charge safe.

So he gave the order to fall back.

At once the Blues proceeded to do this in the best of order.

Back through the cut they went until finally they saw the higher ground and knew that they must for a time yet remain in the hills or make a detour.

This was annoying to Jack, who was anxious to get out of the place and make his way to Black Swamp to head off Howell. He had no idea who the foe in front of him could be.

"It looks as if we were in for a day's fight, Jack," said Hal.

"Yes, and, hang it, it's too bad!"

"So it is!"

"Send Jean to me! He knows all this region. Perhaps he can suggest a way out of this scrape."

The little Frenchman came in response to the call.

"Oui, m'sieur!" he said. "We may follow yonder ridge and descend by another cut. We will then gain the open country, as you desire."

"That settles it!" cried Jack. "Forward!"

The Blues fell back to the ridge.

To Jack's surprise, the foe did not follow. For some reason or other they preferred to remain masters of the cut.

But the young captain was quite willing that they should. He drew his men up on the ridge and then fired a parting volley.

The Blues followed the ridge for a way and ran down on the other side. In a half hour they had come into the cut described by Jean.

The little Frenchman rubbed his hands.

"Ah, m'sieur capitaine!" he cried, "we are all right now. We shall soon find our way back to the swamp. We shall get there by nightfall."

"Too bad!" said Jack. "I fear that will be too late!"

"Too late?"

"Yes! I fear Howell will have entered the swamp and got beyond our reach."

"Ah, m'sieur must hope! We will try hard," said the optimistic little Frenchman.

For a long time they descended through the cut. Then suddenly Jack held up his hand and the Blues halted. The young captain took a few steps forward and remained in a listening attitude.

"What is it, Jack?" asked Hal.

"Listen! Do you not hear voices?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Hal in surprise. From the distance down the cut came a jargon of sounds. Jack gave the order to go forward quickly.

So the Blues noiselessly marched on. The sounds grew more distinct. Suddenly turning a corner in the defile an astounding scene was revealed.

In the side of the cut was a deep depression. From the mountain wall a solitary tree overhung it.

Beneath this tree was a strange assemblage. The sight held the Blues for a moment spellbound.

The assemblage was none other than a score of the guerrillas and Howell among them.

Under the tree stood a white-faced man. At sight of him, bound and with a rope about his neck, Jack and Hal gave a gasp.

They recognized him at once as John Boughton.

The mountaineer was facing his foe and the man who had wronged him. Howell was flinging taunts into his face.

"So you thought you could run me down, did you, my old friend?" jeered Howell. "You are just as big a fool as all the rest, I think, who have lived to learn that Ward Howell cannot be defeated."

"Your boasts are quite in keeping with your vile nature," said Boughton. "Ye need not think to frighten me. I am ready to die, for I shall then join the dear ones of whom your villainy deprived me!"

"Bah! You are a soft-head!" sneered the villain. "Your daughter was only a fool."

Boughton writhed in his bonds.

"Coward! You dare not meet me on even terms!" cried the mountaineer.

"Why should I?" sneered the guerrilla. "I can torture you to death, and that is what I intend to do. I will—"

"Surrender!" cried Jack in a voice of steel. Astounded, the guerrilla chief turned. He saw long rows of muskets pointed at him and his band.

"Make one move to resist, and you shall be shot down like dogs!"

"Fire on 'em!" shrieked Howell. "Up, men! It's them cussed Blues! Wipe them out this time! Charge!"

But Howell had not now six hundred heavily armed men at his back. His followers saw that the odds were against them and threw down their arms.

Howell in vain raved and urged them to resist. They submitted without a struggle.

The guerrilla chief himself was overpowered and bound. Then the noose was taken from Boughton's neck.

"Thank heaven!" he groaned. "You came in time to save me. Not that I care for life, but I shall now be able to claim the justice so long sought."

"Ye won't hang me!" shrieked Howell. "I demand courteous treatment, I'm a regular officer in the Confederate Army. I demand to be treated as a prisoner of war."

"Oh, you do?" said Jack quietly. "Can you show your commission, Howell?"

"It is at my camp!"

"That is destroyed!"

"Destroyed?" The guerrilla stared.

"Yes, and your band is scattered. Your career is at an end, Ward Howell. Our mission is over, and we can report to the President that we have done our duty."

"I'll give my parole!"

"Not on this earth! Here, Peters, bring me that halter!"

Terrified beyond expression, the villain raved and howled. Jack placed the noose over his head.

"Lead him under that tree," he said. "Here, Boughton, I promised you that the honor should be yours. Here is the end of the rope!"

So ended the career of Ward Howell, as black a fiend as ever claimed connection with any army. Boughton, he who had been so deeply wronged, swung him in air, and thus gained his vengeance.

The Blues did not tarry in the vicinity. Studley retired before McCurdy and there was no battle. Jack learned that Kitty Belcourt was again safe at Buxton's plantation. He also learned that Nellie Prentiss had gone back to Richmond.

John Boughton went back to his mountaineer home to keep his promise never to fight again against the Union.

The Fairdale Blues in due time returned to Coon's Ferry to await further orders. And so ends the story of their expedition on special service.

THE END

Read "BIVOUAC AND BATTLE; OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY'S HARD CAMPAIGN," which will be the next number (8) of "Blue and Gray Weekly."

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